Pandora Hearts
パンドラハーツ
Caucus Race
3
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Begin Reading

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PandoraHearts
CANDY DROPS

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Pandora Hearts

Caucus Race

3

Written by
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Jun Mochizuki

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Dance, dance, puzzle pieces!
Unbound words, mismatched happenings.
Now they're all in place, and the picture is…

What?

The Story
of
Thresholds

A PROMISE LOST

Pure Desire

The final battle was about to begin.

The challenger was Caudwell, the pitch-black knight. Rising to meet him was the golden knight, Walter.

As the sun like a ripe fruit sank on the distant horizon, these two whom the world called “heroes” quietly leveled their swords. They kept their eyes fixed on each other.

When Caudwell spoke, he was keenly aware that this would surely be their last conversation:

“Listen carefully. Hear the voice of the wind, Golden Knight. The people are calling for release from the old days.”

Walter spoke with eager anticipation for the bloody battle he was about to fight:

“The wind should content itself with daintily stirring the forest grasses. I stand here entrusted with this land.”

The battlefield on which the pair faced each other was littered with a host of corpses, and the flowing blood formed several rivers.

All were soldiers who had offered up their faith and their lives to Caudwell or to Walter, and had fallen.

The two bore countless souls on their shoulders. As a result, they could no longer lower the swords they'd taken up.

They hated each other more than anything, while at the same time, they understood each other better than anyone, and still there was no way for them to compromise.

One sought to set the age in motion. The other sought to prevent him. The only path that remained for either was to settle the matter with cold steel.

The sun sank. Night came.

Which of them was it who spoke the very last words?

"I thought we could be friends, you know."

—*Recollections of Black and Gold*, by Evil B.

1

In the wood owned by the Baskervilles, there stood a lone tower.

One afternoon, when the sunlight fell softly…

When the current head of the Baskervilles, Glen Baskerville—a man who'd been called Levi until he inherited his current name—visited the room, *she* was resting her elbows on the windowsill, looking out.

Both the walls and the floor of the tower room were bare, and the rough stonework lay exposed. It seemed a bit too bleak for a lady's private room. A bed, a sofa, bookshelves, and minimal furnishings. There weren't many things in the wide, round room, but their workmanship made it clear at a glance that they were all first-class articles.

From her place at the window, *she* must have registered the visitor's footsteps, but she didn't turn to look at Levi.

Beyond the window lay the vast forest that surrounded the tower, but *she* wasn't looking at the forest. *She* was looking nearly straight down. When he saw her there, gazing down gloomily, Levi broke into a mischievous smile.

"…Lacie."

He called to her back.

At that, in response to the voice, *she*—Lacie—turned, her long, black hair swaying. Her strong-willed red eyes found Levi. Those eyes marked Lacie as an accursed child of ill omen.

"What's the matter? See something interesting down there?"

As she answered Levi's question, Lacie's tone was cold:

"Nii-sama and Jack are about to fight with swords. That's your doing, isn't it, Glen."

"Those aren't real swords. They're just blunted toys for mock battles."

Levi's response earned him a caustic look

from Lacie. *That's not what I was asking*, her eyes seemed to say.

Lightly evading the look, Levi walked over to stand beside Lacie. He looked down, too.

Behind the tower, on a narrow, grassy lawn, two men stood facing each other, holding swords. One, a reticent man with black hair, was Levi's valet, Oswald. The other was Jack Vessalius, a mild-looking man with long, golden hair bound into a single braid.

In addition to serving as Levi's valet, Oswald was Lacie's older brother. In the near future, he would become the next "Glen," the head of the Baskervilles. By nature, he was taciturn and serious to a fault: the polar opposite of his carefree master.

Jack Vessalius was the third son of the House of Vessalius, a lower-ranking noble family. About two months earlier, he'd visited the Baskerville mansion as a musician for the House of Barma, and had been reunited with Lacie for the first time in eight years…apparently. Jack had told Levi that, for those eight years, he'd thought of nothing except seeing her again. Then Levi had told him about a secret way into the mansion,

and had simultaneously given him permission—or rather, ordered him—to come and see Lacie. Ever since, he'd shown up once every two or three days.

Levi was amused by Jack's devotion and his innocent—or, no, it was too strong for innocence—adoration for Lacie.

"Don't give me that look." As Levi responded to the girl, who'd fixed him with an accusing glare, he sounded entertained. "I told him it was all right for the two of you to go on an outing. You and Jack."

At Levi's casual words, Lacie's eyes widened very slightly.

…As a child of ill omen, she was kept isolated in this tower.

Although she was allowed to stroll around the Baskerville mansion and the area surrounding the tower, she was forbidden to leave the grounds. Very rarely, Levi would invite her to go into town with him, but these were special cases, and she was never allowed to go out without a Baskerville chaperone.

Lacie looked suspicious, and Levi continued: *But.*

“I gave him one condition. He has to win a swordfight against Oswald.”

“Not possible,” Lacie said, flatly and with no hesitation. Levi’s amused expression didn’t flicker.

“You don’t think so?” he asked. “When I told him you were bored because you couldn’t leave the grounds, Jack was all for it. He does have some experience, apparently.”

“You’re well aware of Nii-sama’s skill with a sword.”

“True. None of my best people can match him. …Besides, I told Oswald not to lose.”

“Whatever for? Are you just killing time?”

Lacie’s question held a hint of displeasure. Levi told her that wasn’t it.

“If I wanted that, I’d have had them do something more interesting. —Ah, they’re starting.”

At Levi’s prompting, Lacie glanced down.

Until that point, Jack and Oswald had been talking, but they’d broken off their conversation, put a little distance between them, and were readying their swords. When

Levi called to them from the window with an easygoing “Heeeey,” they both looked up in the direction of the voice.

Oswald bowed to his master silently. There was no change in his expression.

When Jack saw Lacie next to Levi, his face brightened. “Hallo, Lacie!” he called, waving a hand.

“……”

However, Lacie didn’t respond. She only looked at Jack.

With a sidelong glance at Lacie, Levi gave a faint smile, then addressed the pair on the ground:

“All right, you two. Start on my mark. Understand?”

At Levi’s words, Jack and Oswald looked at each other, then formally touched the tips of their swords together. Jack’s smile vanished, and the eyes he turned on Oswald were serious. At Levi’s “Go!”, Jack made the first move. Oswald stood still, waiting for him.

Seeming impressed by Jack’s daring, Levi muttered:

“Well, if he lasts a minute, we’ll call it a good fight—”

Before he’d even finished his sentence, there was a metallic *clannng*, and Jack’s sword was knocked high into the air.

…By a single blow from Oswald.

Thrown off-balance by the casual attack, Jack sat down hard on the lawn. Oswald swung the blade back, pointing its tip at Jack’s nose. Astonished, Jack stared at the sword’s tip. The lightning-fast battle had winded him, and his shoulders were heaving.

“…Wow.” Levi covered his face with one hand.

Beside Levi, Lacie sighed. The sigh sounded disgusted, but there was something like relief in it, too.

Then she spoke:

“…He didn’t last ten seconds.”

“Nope. We’ll have to think of some conditions.”

And so Jack was given new conditions.

From this point on, he was allowed to attack Oswald at any time, whenever and as

often as he pleased. In addition, if he managed to hit Oswald once, no matter how he did it, it would count as a win for Jack. No matter how many times he was beaten back, as long as he didn't admit defeat, he wouldn't lose his right to challenge him.

It was an unprecedented handicap.

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. During that time, Jack continued to be thwarted by his target.

2

“—Oswald’s weakness?”

Levi repeated the question Jack had asked him. There were three people in the room: Levi, Jack, and Lacie. Levi was leaning against the wall with a book he’d been reading in one hand. Lacie was seated on the sofa, holding a stuffed black rabbit on her lap.

Jack was hugging his knees on a chair, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Yes. I was hoping you’d tell me if you knew.”

His appearance was rather wretched. He had a gauze patch on his cheek; there was a poultice on the back of his right hand and a bandage wound around his left. There were probably lots of hidden bruises as well. These were the price Jack had paid for continuing to challenge Oswald over the past three days.

Levi eyed Jack frankly, up and down.

Then he spoke, sounding impressed:

“You’re looking pretty torn up.”

At Levi’s words, Jack laughed wryly: “Ha-ha-ha…

“Thanks to that, though, I know: I can’t beat him by challenging him fairly.”

With a disgusted sigh, Lacie murmured, “*Finally.*”

Jack scratched at his cheek with his fingertip. His expression was apologetic, but, possibly because he’d sensed some consideration for himself in Lacie’s voice, he seemed a bit happy, too. Levi, still leaning against the wall, watched the two of them, amused. He put a hand on Jack’s shoulder.

“And so you want to take advantage of Oswald’s weakness. It’s not a bad idea. But…”

“You’re right. Nii-sama’s weakness…”

Lacie also murmured; she put a hand to her shapely chin and seemed to brood.

Seeing both Levi and Lacie look stumped, Jack drew his eyebrows together in concern.

Quietly, he spoke:

“He…doesn’t have one, then? True, he leaves no openings—”

“Nope.”

“No.”

Levi and Lacie spoke at the same time. — *Huh?* Jack looked at them.

They both continued:

“He’s got too many.”

“He has too many.”

Jack looked blank. He blinked rapidly.

“Too many… You mean weaknesses? Oswald does?”

“That’s right,” Lacie agreed. “So many, I wasn’t sure which to tell you about first,” she said.

“Mm-hm.” Levi nodded gravely.

“First, Oswald’s a nap fiend. To put it bluntly, the guy sleeps anywhere. I bet he’s probably napping somewhere in the forest nearby right now. If you haven’t seen him like that yet, Jack, you’ve just had bad timing.”

Jack’s eyes were wide with surprise.

“But…” He looked puzzled.

“But wouldn’t someone of Oswald’s caliber sense me and wake up if I simply came near him with a sword?”

Lacie shook her head, speaking with decisive self-confidence:

“He wouldn’t wake up. Not for something like that. Even if the forest was on fire, Nii-sama would have no trouble staying asleep. Then, when he woke after all the trees had burned to ash, he’d probably say…”

At that point, Lacie scowled in an imitation of Oswald and mimicked his speech:

“‘The landscape was different when I fell asleep. What’s the meaning of this?’”

She’d captured his mannerisms well, and Levi snorted with laughter. Jack never doubted anything Lacie told him, but even he said, “…I see,” as if he hadn’t expected that.

“And then—Let’s see.”

Lacie kept speaking, sounding entertained. She didn’t seem to feel any compunction about telling him Oswald’s weaknesses. On the contrary: Her voice was cheerful, as

though she was telling him the things she thought were cute about her big brother.

She tapped her lips lightly with a finger.

“Cherry tomatoes. He doesn’t like eating those.”

“Cherry…tomatoes?”

Possibly he again hadn't expected Lacie's words; Jack repeated them, sounding bewildered:

"By 'cherry tomatoes,' you mean those? The little tomatoes?"

"That's right."

Lacie nodded decisively. Levi picked up her words and continued:

"He says the way the pulp spurts out when he bites into them is nauseating, and he can't handle it. The last time he accidentally ate one, Oswald froze up and stayed that way for a while. Nothing changed, not even his expression, so the server didn't notice."

Levi snickered as if he'd remembered it.

Lacie also smiled merrily.

"The mansion was in an uproar over it."

Jack murmured appreciatively, folding his arms and lowering his head, as if he was thinking:

"…He's that bad with them. So bad he freezes up… That certainly is a weakness."

“I like them. They’re delicious.”

Lacie laughed gaily. Then she went on:

“And then— The people Nii-sama likes are probably a weakness, too.”

“Ah, I think I understand that. Sort of.”

Jack nodded.

Levi said, “He’s the type who’ll get his head taken off while he’s sleeping by somebody he trusts. He’s sickeningly naive.” His tone was joking, but the words were caustic. Lacie glanced at Levi, correcting him: “Nii-sama is *kind*.” Jack nodded, agreeing with Lacie. Then his face grew cheerful:

“In that case, naturally the person Oswald likes would be—”

The three of them spoke at once:

“Jack,” said Lacie.

“Lacie,” said Jack.

“Me!” said Levi.

Wordlessly, with odd expressions on their faces, Jack and Lacie looked at Levi.

Levi seemed full of confidence; he’d jabbed a thumb at his own chest and spoken

as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. As she looked at him, Lacie's gaze was endlessly cold.

"Of course it's me. I'm his master, after all!"

Levi firmly pointed at himself again, emphasizing this. Lacie let her gaze slip away from him, pretending she hadn't seen or heard a thing. At that cold reaction, Levi's expression softened happily.

Jack spoke, with a bewildered smile:

"Erm, Lacie? I'd believe it's you or his master, but I can't imagine it's me."

"—I wonder."

Lacie only smiled coolly.

Jack began folding down the fingers of his right hand, counting Oswald's weaknesses. They'd mentioned three: napping, cherry tomatoes, and "people he likes." Jack exhaled, sounding impressed. "There are lots more," Lacie said.

Jack shook his head.

"No, this is more than enough."

"Well, give it your best. Lacie's looking

forward to going out, too. —Aren't you?"

Levi spoke, putting an arm around Lacie's shoulders and drawing her close.

Lacie pushed at Levi as if he was a nuisance and spoke bluntly:

"That's right. I was supposed to get to go earlier, but it got canceled, you see. I'm looking forward to it, Jack."

Two months earlier. The day Jack had visited the Baskerville mansion as a musician.

Originally, Lacie had been supposed to go into town with Levi. However, Levi had forgotten about the social affair with the House of Barma, and he'd had to break his promise. Lacie's words held more sarcasm aimed at Levi than actual anticipation directed at Jack.

However, Jack's expression was filled with delight.

"All right, Lacie. I'll take you outside."

His expression and words were far too direct; they were the complete opposite of the other pair's exchange, which had been charged with unspoken meaning. As she

looked at Jack, Lacie's eyes widened very slightly. For his part, Levi narrowed his eyes at Jack, intrigued.

With a cruel smile, he muttered:

"You know, you really are—"

* * *

After leaving the room, Jack descended the stairs alone.

"I'm looking forward to it, Jack."

His expression was filled with cheerful satisfaction at the words Lacie had spoken to him.

The feelings inside him were pure, unmarred by a single cloud.

Lacie, your delight is my delight. Your joy is my joy—

Ever since the day he'd met her, under a cold, gray sky.

The world had been hollow and meaningless, and so had he, but for the first time, everything had gained meaning.

…Himself, an illegitimate child. His father, who'd abandoned him and his mother. His mother, who'd continued to

believe in his father until she'd broken. He'd hated the whole world, becoming completely empty in the end, and then she'd appeared, and meaning was born.

She'd been the one to shine a light on this being called "Jack," when even he hadn't been able to find meaning in him. The one woman whose direct gaze had picked "Jack" out from this vast world. Lacie.

I couldn't care less about the fact that I was living and that I would eventually die.

Until I met you, Lacie—

"That's right, Lacie. You are my light. This is all for your sake."

He murmured as if singing, as if whispering. That alone had become the meaning of Jack's life.

A pleasurable feeling almost like intoxication spread through his body.

I could never want anything else—

"…Jack."

As Jack left the tower, Oswald called to him. He'd been standing beside the door.

Jack had been told that he was probably

napping in the shade of the forest somewhere nearby, and he was startled; he straightened up and looked at him.

“It’s you, Oswald?”

Unless he was ordered to do so by his master or had a particular reason for being there, Oswald never visited his sister’s room. Levi didn’t seem to have forbidden them from meeting; apparently it was Oswald’s way of drawing a line.

Indifferently, Oswald asked, “What did you discuss with my master?”

“Well, we—”

On the verge of replying, Jack seemed to catch himself. He thrust out an open hand in a theatrical gesture, as if to repel Oswald.

“Ah, but I can’t tell you what we talked about.”

“I see. It doesn’t matter.”

Even though he’d been the one to ask, Oswald didn’t seem particularly interested. After saying it didn’t matter, he fell silent. He only watched Jack, steadily. Jack fidgeted, seeming vaguely uncomfortable.

“Well, um, Oswald… I’ll be going, then.”

With that, Jack began to move away from Oswald. Oswald spoke to his back:

“—Your sword is warped.”

“Huh?”

Jack stopped, turning around.

Oswald’s expression didn’t change. As he continued, he kept his eyes fixed on Jack:

“…Your basic form isn’t bad. However, the balance between your offense and defense is uneven. With your skills, even against me, you shouldn’t get so injured. Why do you use your sword purely for offense, without defending?”

Coming from Oswald, this was a long speech, and Jack looked startled. However, he soon gave a little smile and responded:

“Because getting wounded isn’t a condition for my defeat. Why would I need to defend?”

Jack said this as if it was only natural, and Oswald narrowed his eyes in a glare.

“Later, then,” Jack told him, raising a hand, and this time he did leave. Silently, Oswald watched his receding back.

3

Then Jack's attempts began again.

It was the day after he'd spoken about weaknesses with Levi and Lacie.

That afternoon, Jack cut through the forest and came to the tower, but he didn't go inside. Instead, walking stealthily, he searched the area.

Today, it was just as Levi had said.

It didn't take him long to find Oswald. He was sitting under a Japanese zelkova, leaning back against the trunk, breathing quietly in his sleep. There was a songbird perched on his shoulder. It was pecking at his black hair, playing with it, but Oswald was as still as a statue. He was fast asleep.

He really isn't waking up, Jack thought, silently impressed. Slowly, he crept toward Oswald. He clenched his right hand, the one closed around the hilt of his lowered sword.

Without making a sound, he drew closer to the zelkova where Oswald slept. Little by little, the distance between the two shrank.

Carried on the forest wind, the faint sound of Oswald's breathing reached Jack's ears.

"……He's sleeping really well," he murmured.

His voice was tense.

Just a little longer, just a few more steps, and he'd be able to reach him with his sword.

Oswald hadn't moved. His breathing was quiet and regular.

I can do this, Jack thought, and just as he took the last step—

Snnnap!

His right foot came down on a dry branch that had been lurking under the fallen leaves, and a sharp sound rang out. At the same time, the songbird launched itself from Oswald's shoulder, furiously flapping its wings and loudly crying *cheep cheep!* This flustered Jack, and:

"Agh, n-no, don't!"

…Without thinking, he yelled.

In the next instant, he hastily clapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. It was hopeless. If there was a racket this close by, *anyone* would wake up—

But.

"……
Nn."

Oswald gave a little groan, stirred slightly, and that was all. Nothing else changed. He was nowhere near waking up. His breathing remained peaceful.

On seeing this, Jack looked deeply moved. *He really* isn't *waking up!*

Carefully, boldly, Jack stood right in front of Oswald, who slept at the foot of the zelkova. The sun was behind Jack, and his shadow fell across Oswald's face, but it wasn't enough to provoke the smallest reaction. Slowly, Jack raised his sword above his head.

Oswald kept right on sleeping.

"_____!"

With a sharp exhalation, Jack brought the sword down. Its steel blade reflected the

sunlight, slicing through the wind, bearing down on Oswald.

To the very end, Oswald's eyes remained quietly, peacefully closed.

But.

"……Huh?"

Having brought the sword down, Jack froze. A dazed murmur escaped him.

As it raced toward Oswald, the blade had been caught. Easily and firmly. By Oswald's right hand.

Oswald's eyes were still closed. It was as if he was still slumbering peacefully.

No:

"……Nnuh."

With a little groan, he raised his head slightly. His eyelids opened, vacantly.

Jack gulped. A shiver ran down his spine.

"Uh, no, this was, um, you see, Oswald—"

Flustered, Jack hastily tried to explain himself, but there was no explaining this particular situation. However, Oswald only turned his half-open, unfocused eyes on Jack.

He gave no other response.

He was in a daze.

“Um, Os…wald.”

“……”

“Oswald? Are you still…half-asleep?”

“……”

“Oh, there’s a caterpillar on your shoulder.”

“……”

“Ah! A boulder’s about to fall on you!”

“……”

“Aah, Oswald, your master is in trouble!!”

“……

Oswald’s daze was endless.

Th-that’s amazing, Jack marveled.

His shoulders shook and his breathing was rough.

He’d gotten worked up and spoken to him in spite of himself, but come to think of it, this was an opportunity. Gently, Jack pulled at the sword that Oswald’s right hand had caught. Oswald released it without a

struggle.

"*Phew.*" Jack exhaled. He raised the sword again, his eyes grew sharp— A flash.

He swept in from the side, aiming for Oswald's torso.

This time, he didn't hold back. He struck with all his might.

His sword was caught again.

Oswald's left hand had stopped it this time, in a beautifully spare motion.

"……" Dazed Oswald.

"Oswald?! You actually *are* awake, aren't y—"

Something tugged at his sword. "Huh?" said Jack.

The pull had been stronger than he'd expected, and the sword left his hand.

And then.

Grasping the tip of the blade, Oswald swung the sword around, and the pommel connected solidly with the side of Jack's face.

It was a brilliant, bewitching attack.

"Obwuh?!"

Jack fell unconscious. Having regained his peace and quiet, Oswald nodded off to sleep again.

A little while later, when Oswald slowly opened his eyes at the foot of the Japanese zelkova, he stood and spoke to Jack, who was lying in front of him. He didn't seem to remember any of what had happened while he'd been half-asleep.

"Jack? You'll catch a cold if you nap there."

* * *

THE DAY AFTER THAT.

Jack stood in front of Oswald, a cherry tomato concealed in his hand. They were on the tower's first floor, in the space that acted as an entry hall. Oswald had been just about to climb the stairs; maybe Levi had summoned him. Jack was blocking his way.

"Did you need something?" Oswald asked, dispassionately.

Jack held his sword in one hand, ready to slash at him at any moment, but Oswald didn't seem to register it; he was relaxed. He made no move to reach for the sword

hanging at his own hip.

“Hallo, Oswald. Beautiful weather today, isn’t it?”

Jack smiled brightly as he spoke.

At his words, Oswald glanced through the first-floor window at the sky. It was blanketed with thick clouds.

“……”

After a short silence, Oswald responded:

“Indeed.”

To Jack, the answer seemed slightly pitying. However, his amiable smile didn’t flicker. That said, a closer look revealed that a trickle of cold sweat was making its way down his forehead. To put it bluntly, he was suspicious.

Oswald cocked his head, as if Jack puzzled him.

“If you don’t need anything, then move. My master has summoned me.”

In response, Jack nodded enthusiastically, showing that he understood. …But he didn’t budge one step from his place in front of Oswald. He wasn’t about to get out of the

way. As if to say, *In that case*, Oswald tried to cut around him and go up the stairs.

As if mirroring him, Jack moved in the same direction, blocking Oswald's path.

What is this? Oswald's eyebrows drew together in irritation.

Jack still had that bright, ingratiating smile plastered across his face.

…Jack's hand held a single cherry tomato.

If he tossed it into Oswald's mouth, he'd freeze up, and he wouldn't go back to normal for a while.

The problem was how to execute the plan…

It seemed easy, but it wasn't.

If they'd had an opportunity to eat together, that would have been one thing, but suddenly saying "Let's go eat!" would be unnatural.

Jack thought. All he really needed to do was get him to open his mouth. In that case, why not have him sing something? "Oswald, it's such a beautiful day, I'd love to hear you sing!" …No, that would be far too suspicious. In that case, although this was a bit heavy-

handed… He could watch for his chance, tickle Oswald's sides, and the instant he laughed, toss it into his mouth—!

No, if that had been possible, he wouldn't have been doing something as roundabout as trying to take advantage of his weaknesses in the first place.

As Jack worried and fretted, Oswald's shoulders slumped slightly, and he spoke:

"If you need something, then tell me. I won't know what it is if you don't."

"Uh, oh, that's right! Oswald, could you open your mouth for a second?" Jack asked.

While he'd been worrying about how to broach the topic, he'd gone and used on impulse the least likely approach to work. It was too late for regrets. Naturally, Oswald looked suspicious. He shook his head slowly, as if in disgust, and turned a direct, piercing gaze on Jack.

"I have no idea what you're saying."

Well, of course you don't! Inwardly, Jack agreed with him. It was impossible to explain this away. It was hopeless, but he couldn't turn back now.

He managed to hang on to his insincere smile, so as not to make him wary.

“It’s easy. Just say ‘Aaaah’ for me. You see? All you have to do is open your mouth.”

“Why do you want me to do that?”

“Ah, no reason. Nothing special. Ah-ha-ha, it’s nothing important.”

It had been a perfectly natural question, and he hadn’t really answered it at all. There was no reason to expect a request like this one to work. Ordinarily, at any rate.

However, as if he saw no help for it, Oswald opened his mouth partway:

“Aaah…”

“Huh?! You’re *doing* it?!”

Even though he’d been the one to ask him to, Jack was astonished from the bottom of his heart. At his contradictory reaction, Oswald looked suspicious. …*What a nice fellow you are!* Jack thought, deeply moved. In the next moment, his eyes flashed, and he swung one hand.

“_____!”

The distance was point-blank. The open

mouth was right there.

The cherry tomato left Jack's hand, streaking through space like a bullet. Nobody would expect to get a cherry tomato thrown at them under these circumstances. That meant even Oswald wouldn't be able to react — Or so he thought.

Shing.

Oswald had been completely defenseless, but at his hip, the sword leapt from its sheath with a cool, metallic sound, and in the next instant… The cherry tomato Jack had thrown stopped dead in midair. Then a line ran through its center, and the tomato slid apart, falling to the floor in two pieces.

The tomato squished with a light *splut*. Small droplets struck Oswald's shoe.

Silently, Oswald wiped his sword and returned it to its sheath.

Jack was frozen, still posed as if he'd just thrown the tomato. The two of them stared each other right in the eye.

"……"

"……"

Wordlessly, Jack and Oswald looked at

each other.

The sword Oswald had sheathed at his hip wasn't the fine blade he generally used.

Jack was using a blunted sword meant for mock battles, and the sword Oswald wore was edgeless as well. How much skill would it take to split a thrown cherry tomato cleanly in two, without crushing it, with a sword like that?

"—Was that all you needed?"

At Oswald's words, Jack nodded vigorously and stepped aside. Oswald passed him, heading up the stairs. Partway up, he glanced back, looking down at Jack. Jack found himself the target of a gaze that had an iron reticence about it.

It was possible that he was angry, but at the very least, Jack couldn't read anger in his expression.

"One thing, Jack."

"Y-yes?!"

Jack flinched, straightening up on reflex. Oswald spoke, briefly and simply:

"I'm not fond of those. In future, be careful."

* * *

Oswald disappeared upstairs, leaving Jack behind.

"…My. He really is amazing, isn't he."

Voicing an honest compliment, Jack held one hand up in front of his face. Then he bent the fingers down, counting.

"Napping didn't work, cherry tomatoes didn't work. Hmm. All that's left is…"

Lacie's words rose in the back of Jack's mind.

"The people Nii-sama likes are probably a weakness, too."

"I see," Jack murmured.

His expression was cheerful. He opened the hand he'd been using to count and held it against his chest, on the left side.

"I can just use that."

4

“Jack seems to be working hard.”

In the room, Lacie spoke. She was lying on the sofa, looking up at the ceiling.

Levi turned from his place by the window; he’d been gazing outside.

“It doesn’t look like he’s getting results, though. After we told him those weaknesses, too…”

“…And? Why are you making him do it?”

Lacie’s question came abruptly, and her voice was cold. “……Huh?” Levi cocked his head, an extremely weird look on his face. Lacie glared at him; her eyes were stern.

“I asked if you were just killing time, and you said that wasn’t it. You still haven’t given me an answer.”

Levi looked pensive, as if he had no idea what she was talking about.

He didn’t seem to remember what Lacie

had asked him on the day Jack and Oswald first crossed swords behind the tower, but Lacie didn't help him. She only watched him coldly.

Before long, Levi clapped his hands together lightly.

"Oh, *that* question. Huh. You remember some really petty stuff."

"If it isn't to kill time, then why?"

Lacie repeated her question; she didn't intend to go along with Levi's bantering.

Hmm. Levi hemmed a bit, but maybe he didn't feel like keeping it a secret at this late date. He answered plainly:

"For reference. For a novel."

Lacie blinked several times. "A novel?" she echoed. Levi liked reading, and he also wrote novels himself. Occasionally, he took them to publishers, hiding his rank as the head of the Baskervilles behind a pseudonym.

"I was writing a tale of chivalry. I modeled the two protagonists on Oswald and Jack. In the final scene, the two of them duel; I brought this up with Jack because I thought I

could use it as a reference, but… The stuff he's giving me isn't interesting at all.

"If Jack doesn't put up a better fight than that…" Levi said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Have you finished that novel already?"

"No, I got bored and quit. I'm working on another one now."

"Then there's no point anymore in what you're making Jack do, is there?"

"Well, no." Levi laughed.

"The one I'm writing now is a detective novel. It's a showdown between a great detective who lives in the old part of town and a mysterious killer."

"…How clichéd."

"Didn't you know? They say authors who snub the classic approaches are the first to die."

"And who said that, I wonder?"

"That's obvious. Me."

Lacie looked disgusted. "—I see," she said, and that was all.

Levi looked mischievous.

“Did that make you want to read it?”

“Not in the least. Stuff written with a tasteless pen name like that…”

Lacie rejected him flatly, turning away.

Levi’s pen name, which Lacie had called “tasteless,” was Evil B. “B,” the last name, was the first letter of Baskerville, while the name “Evil” was an anagram. When the letters were rearranged, they spelled “Levi.”

“Well, art *should* be tasteless, you know.”

Levi sounded as if he was boasting about his faults, and Lacie ignored him. However, as if something had caught her attention, she sat up on the sofa.

Brushing back her hair with one hand, she asked a question:

“Are you using those two as models this time, too?”

“Who knows?”

Levi sounded evasive. He crossed to the sofa and sat down beside Lacie. He put his face close to Lacie’s profile.

“So, this detective and murderer. They don’t seem to be connected at all, but they’re

actually linked. A long time ago, the detective gave a small present to the murderer. The detective's completely forgotten about this present and the person he gave it to, but the murderer, the one who got the present, remembers…"

Lacie kept looking straight ahead. She didn't turn toward Levi's face, right next to hers. Then: "It's a common story," she said, shortly.

"Something the giver didn't pay much attention to and has forgotten, but the recipient treasures."

"Yeah, you're right."

Levi put up a hand and touched Lacie's left earlobe with a fingertip. Lacie's right ear was ornamented with an earring, but her left ear was bare. All that remained was the faint scar from a piercing.

Originally, Lacie's left ear had worn an earring that matched the one on her right. However, at present, the earring that had graced Lacie's left ear hung from Jack's ear instead. Lacie had never said how this had come to be.

How, eight years ago, on the day she'd

first met Jack, she'd given him the earring.

"—Yeah, it's a common story."

Levi laughed, amused, and stood up from the sofa. In the end, he hadn't answered the question, "*Are you using those two as models this time, too?*"

He looked down at Lacie.

"All right. He couldn't make the napping or the cherry tomato work for him. What do you think Jack's going to do?"

"I have no idea," Lacie answered.

5

The Baskerville mansion was on the outer edge of the forest. From the roof of the tower, it looked small.

“Is this where we’re going to fight today, then?”

Having been told by Jack to come to the roof, Oswald broached the subject, maintaining his habitual, unwavering reticence as he did so. There was absolutely nothing on the tower’s stone roof. It was a bleak, empty space.

Jack nodded. “Yes, that’s right. You don’t like it?” he asked.

As Oswald answered, his expression didn’t flicker:

“It doesn’t matter. Do as you please.”

The two of them stood at the center of the roof. They faced each other with just enough distance between them that the tips of their

swords would touch, once they raised them. The situation was almost the same as it had been when Jack first challenged Oswald, a few days before.

Oswald had said he didn't care where they fought, and Jack beamed at him:

"I like it. I've never been on the roof before. The view is terrific."

Then his eyes left Oswald, turning toward the door to the tower stairs.

He called out, merrily:

"Do you come here often, Lacie?"

Lacie stood on the roof, right by the top of the stairs.

She wasn't there because Jack had invited her.

Lacie had seen the two of them go up to the roof and had followed them, wordlessly. She stood beside the stairs, arms folded, watching them indifferently. At Jack's question, Lacie shook her head slightly.

"No, only a handful of times. The wind is strong here."

Even as Lacie spoke, a gust of wind

whistled through, flaring her long hair and dress.

With his blond braid waving in the wind, Jack said, “You’re right,” and smiled.

“…Jack.”

At that point, Oswald spoke dispassionately.

He kept his eyes on Jack, as if he hadn’t noticed that his sister was there.

“My master has summoned me after this. This is a trivial task, and I’d like to finish up quickly.”

“‘Trivial task’? That’s rather unkind of you. I’m serious about this.”

Even as he answered, Jack turned back to face him, still wearing that soft smile.

“—All right, Oswald. Shall we?”

He spoke quietly. Oswald nodded, smoothly drawing the sword at his hip. Then, when he fixed his eyes on Jack, he abruptly frowned.

Jack’s hand only rested lightly on the hilt of the sword at his hip, and he made no move to draw.

However, as if he was completely prepared, Jack spoke:

“I’m ready when you are, Oswald.”

Lacie, who was watching the two of them, also looked puzzled. “Jack…?” she murmured.

Oswald didn’t seem to care whether his opponent had some sort of plan. “I see,” he murmured. Then he took a step straight toward Jack, as if to say he’d find out what it was once they began their fight. His blade bore down, slicing through the wind.

However, Jack dodged by taking a great leap backward, out of the way. He was still turned solidly toward Oswald. Naturally, Oswald’s sword didn’t stop after that single stroke: He unleashed a second, then a third. Jack concentrated on evading; his hand still rested on the hilt of his sword, but it was as if he’d given up on mounting an attack of his own.

Even so, he always escaped Oswald’s sword by the skin of his teeth.

“—Whoops.”

In no time at all, Jack had been driven to

the edge of the roof.

From where he stood, if he took one more step back, his foot would leave the roof, and he'd fall. Oswald watched Jack, wordlessly. His eyes were cold: Although emotionless, they wouldn't let the other man's slightest move escape them.

In a voice as stern as iron, Oswald spoke:

"What are you playing at today? Do you intend to end this without drawing?"

At the question, Jack smiled faintly.

"Lacie told me, you see."

"……?"

Jack hadn't answered his question, and Oswald narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Jack looked back at Oswald, and his gaze was oddly peaceful. If it had been a color, it would have been transparent. If it had been a sound, it would have been silence.

Jack spoke:

"I'll draw, Oswald."

Casually, Jack launched himself from where he stood. His body rose, gently.

He jumped…lightly…backward.

Then it was as if he'd been swallowed up.

He plummeted from the roof, toward the ground—

"……!!"

Oswald moved quickly. Even so, if he'd started a moment later, he probably wouldn't have made it.

He threw his sword aside and ran, dropped to his knees at the edge of the roof, and caught Jack's wrist as he fell. His body lurched forward as it took Jack's weight, but Oswald managed to support it. Behind them, Lacie gave a small cry, but Oswald didn't respond.

He only turned wide, shocked eyes on Jack, below him. Jack swung in midair, supported only by Oswald's arm.

If he fell, there was absolutely no chance he'd survive. However, as Jack looked up at Oswald, he smiled quietly.

"Oswald, you're strong. My sword would never reach you. But…

"Lacie told me, you see."

“The people Nii-sama likes are probably a weakness, too.

“It’s you, Jack.”

…And so.

“Now is ‘the time’—”

Jack’s free hand went to the sword at his hip. He caught the hilt, drew it out.

Oswald’s hand was currently holding Jack’s wrist.

He was holding on tightly, so he wouldn’t let go. So Jack wouldn’t slip free. So he wouldn’t drop Jack.

He was completely defenseless.

“I win, Oswald.”

“……Jack!”

As he picked up on Jack’s intention, Oswald’s expression was tinged with shock. *Whirr*. Jack’s sword swung, slicing through the wind. Over his own head.

The blade bore down on Oswald’s neck. He really shouldn’t have been able to avoid the attack, but Oswald leaned back, still supporting Jack, and managed to dodge it. The sword cut through the sky. Jack’s expression tensed with surprise and admiration.

Jack’s words were honest, unadulterated praise:

“That’s incredible. You can actually dodge from a position like that…?”

However, evading from an impossible position had taken its toll, and the grip Oswald had on his wrist slackened. Jack’s body lurched, on the point of falling. Oswald’s hand had slipped off his wrist, but at the very last moment, Oswald managed to

grab Jack's hand. He squeezed hard.

Staring blankly, Jack simply let himself be caught. Then a sharp reprimand flew at him:

"What are you doing, Jack?!"

It was the first time Jack had heard Oswald lose his temper.

"Hold on tight! Grab my hand!"

"Oswald…?"

Jack sounded bewildered, but when Oswald yelled, "Hold on!" again, he timidly tightened his grip.

"Don't let go," Oswald ordered, and he hauled him up onto the roof with all his might. Having been practically thrown back onto the roof, Jack got up slowly, brushing the dust off his clothes. Beside him, Oswald exhaled once, deeply, and glared at Jack.

"Jack! You—!"

Interrupting him, Lacie stalked over to them, coming to stand between them.

She stood with her back to Oswald, facing Jack.

Finding himself the focus of a grim, cold gaze, Jack responded with a slight smile:

“Lacie, I’m sorry—”

Without warning, Lacie’s open hand flew at Jack’s cheek. It was a full-force attack.

There was a sharp *smack*.

Taken by surprise, Jack froze, his eyes wide. Lacie glared at him with unmistakable fury.

“You really are a fool… You make me sick.”

With that parting shot, Lacie turned briskly and walked off. It had been a merciless slap, and Jack’s cheek was flushed and smarting. He held a hand to it, watching Lacie go. Oswald had regained his reticence, as if his sister’s actions had taken the edge off his own anger.

For a while, left behind on the roof, the two of them were silent. Finally, quietly, Oswald asked:

“Just what were you trying to do, pulling a stunt like that?”

In response, Jack said, “…Huh?” He was straight-faced, and he sounded as if he hadn’t expected the question. Oswald gave a small sigh and elaborated:

“I’m asking you why you’ve turned your sword on me over and over again since the other day.”

Even that extra information wasn’t enough to erase the surprise from Jack’s face. He murmured, “Huh?” again. “Wait just a minute. You mean your master didn’t tell you anything?”

Oswald nodded. “All my master said was, ‘If Jack attacks you, be his opponent.’

“With a toy sword, not a real one,” he added, pointing to the sword he’d returned to its sheath. With very little enthusiasm, Jack asked, “…Then why did you think I kept challenging you over and over?”

“Hmm. Well…”

As Oswald thought about Jack’s question, his face was so serious it was strange. The question should have been simple, but he thought about it for a long, long time before he finally answered:

“I hadn’t given it much thought… I suppose I assumed you were bored.”

“……What kind of fellow do you think I am?” Jack’s shoulders slumped.

“There must be something behind it, though, for you to do a thing like that.”

“You’re right.”

Jack drooped, looking discouraged.

“I made Lacie angry. I didn’t mean to do that…”

Oswald frowned at this response, as if it didn’t match up somehow. Jack’s words hadn’t held the slightest consideration for the danger he himself had been in.

However, possibly because he didn’t feel like asking about it, Oswald only murmured, “True.” He turned toward the stairway Lacie had descended. In a voice that was as even as ever, he continued:

“It’s unusual to see my sister that way. She must have been very annoyed.”

“I want to take Lacie outside the grounds.”

The voice that had spoken behind him was earnest, and Oswald turned back.

He gazed at Jack, nodding gravely, as if he’d understood the situation at once from those few words.

“I see. So that’s what my master told you,

is it? If you won against me, he'd allow you to take Lacie outside… It sounds like something he'd say. And so you did that in order to create a vulnerability for me?"

Jack nodded.

"Because you're kind."

Then, his expression changing, Jack spoke seriously, although there was a vague hesitation in his voice:

"I failed, though. Since that's the case, this is all I can do now. …Lacie said what she said, but I just can't seem to understand it… Still, this is the only move I have left. And so, erm, I, um…"

His words were vague and rambling. It was unusual to see him like this.

Jack blushed red and bowed his head vigorously.

"Please. Would you lose to me?"

Oswald's eyes widened slightly.

He didn't open his mouth right away. Instead, he thought silently for a while. When Jack raised his head, cautiously, Oswald was looking straight at him, mouth still closed. It felt as if he was being glared

at, and Jack cringed slightly. The wind blew across the roof, brushing past them, tugging at their hair and clothes.

Finally, Oswald spoke:

“Before I answer, let me ask you one thing.”

Oswald’s voice was low, and Jack looked meek. “What might that be?” he responded.

The wind blew harder, tossing Jack’s blond braid.

As Oswald asked his question, dispassionately, he kept his expression nearly still:

“What if_____?”

Jack answered the question without hesitation, wearing a perfectly sincere smile:

“_____, of course.”

At his answer, Oswald said, “I see,” and sighed lightly.

Then his eyes went to Jack. His gaze was sharp, a warrior’s eyes, and it was impossible to tell what sort of personal feelings lay behind it. Slowly, Oswald raised his sword, pointing the tip at Jack and lowering his

center of gravity slightly.

“Unfortunately, my master also instructed me not to lose. As his valet, I must not go against his orders.”

Fixing his eyes on Jack, he told him:

“You really are disgusting.”

Even as he spoke, he swung his sword at Jack. Jack’s eyes went round. It slowed his reaction by an instant, but he managed—just barely—to catch the sword with his blade before it came down on his shoulder. However, the heavy, fierce attack had thrown him far off-balance. This fact did not escape Oswald, and he unleashed another attack on the heels of the first.

Those two attacks were the only ones Jack managed to ward off.

When Oswald took the third attack, the sword Jack had in his hand was knocked high into the air, just as it had been during their first match.

He fell onto his back, defenseless.

Oswald stepped even closer to the fallen Jack.

Jack’s breathing was harsh. He stared up

at Oswald with a dazed expression.

“Os…wald—”

“It’s over.”

Just then, they both heard a whistling sound as something sliced through the wind. Oswald stayed the hand that had been about to bring the sword down, leaning away to the side. Something glinted, reflecting the sunlight. It skimmed past Oswald’s head, grazed Jack’s right ear where he lay, and buried its tip in the stone flags.

It was Jack’s sword. It had been flung straight up in the air. Oswald was silent.

“Ah—”

Murmuring that single sound, Jack stretched his hand out into space.

The hand caught a single strand of hair that was drifting slowly down. A jet-black hair. It was Oswald’s. The sword had severed it when the blade skimmed past his head. Oswald glanced without much interest at the hair in Jack’s hand.

“It was only a scratch, but a scratch is an attack.”

“Huh? Wait, did you do that on—” Jack

muttered.

Oswald spoke in a voice that betrayed no emotion:

“You win, Jack.”

With those brief words, Oswald left the roof. The atmosphere he wore seemed ready to repel any words that might be sent his way. Jack, left behind, was stunned.

His hand gripped the lone hair as if it were an amulet.

6

When did it begin? Lacie wondered.

The black haze that hung in her heart.

It had been barely noticeable at first, but every time she saw Jack, every time she spent more time with him, little by little, the haze grew inside her. It didn't hurt or ache; it wasn't painful. Even so, she couldn't ignore it.

From time to time, it asserted itself, catching her unawares.

Every time it did, Lacie felt as if her heart were being squeezed.

She didn't understand what it was.

When Jack had tried to jump off the roof, she hadn't slapped him because she was worried about him.

It had been pure anger at having her emotions disturbed, an act rooted in intense irritation. Still, it didn't feel as though the

true form of the black haze was “anger” or “irritation.”

There was something inside her that she couldn’t understand. The fact made her restless. She’d accepted even her own destruction, which was scheduled for the not-so-distant future, without resistance, but this… This was unpleasant.

Every time she saw Jack— No, even *thinking* about Jack made the haze expand.

“……”

While she was in her room, lost in thought and doing nothing in particular, Jack came, bringing one of Oswald’s hairs and a report of victory.

Lacie told him:

“I changed my mind. I don’t want to go out.”

Coldly, brusquely, with no compunction. In response to her refusal, Jack said:

“I see. Then we won’t.”

He spoke without hesitation. He wore an innocent, honest, charming smile.

…Just as he had when he’d answered

Oswald.

"What if my sister says she doesn't want to go? What will you do then?"

"Then this never happened, of course."

The words hadn't held the faintest flicker of regret.

For a moment, Lacie looked at Jack with an expression of pity. It soon disappeared, however, and she chased him away, saying, "I'm tired, and I'm going to rest." Jack agreed meekly to this as well, and left the room.

As the door closed on the words "Take care," Lacie got up from the sofa where she'd been sitting and fell facedown across the bed.

What is this, anyway? she thought.

Leave the grounds of the Baskerville mansion with Jack.

When Levi had said, "I told him it was all right for the two of you to go on an outing. You and Jack." When Jack had told her, "I'll take you outside." Lacie had thought, *That would be all right.* When she imagined what it would be like if it happened, she thought it was a decent idea as far as ways to kill time

went. She'd thought it sounded like fun.

At the same time, she'd felt the black haze inside her grow.

What is this? she thought, with her face buried in the soft coverlet.

Lacie moved her head restlessly, glancing at the door Jack had gone out through. No matter how long she looked at it, it didn't open again. Lacie's eyes stayed on the door, and her gaze betrayed no emotion.

She simply kept watching.

It had been decided that, in the near future, she would vanish from this world.

In a little while—not now, not yet—she would learn the identity of this feeling that had taken root inside her heart for the first time.

The feeling called "loneliness."

…Honestly. If Nii-sama hadn't gone and lost
—

Lacie thought, venting her anger elsewhere for no good reason.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING.

Having sat down to breakfast alone, Oswald glanced at the table and fell silent.

In front of him sat a large dish. There they were, in that dish, piled up majestically, like a mountain.

Bright-red, fresh…cherry tomatoes. And nothing else.

That was all the breakfast that had been prepared for him. A mountain of cherry tomatoes that brooked no argument. It was a type of monstrosity.

"……What is this?" Oswald asked the server, dispassionately.

The server explained desperately, with an air that seemed to insist he wasn't to blame:

"G-Glen-sama ordered it. Lacie-sama asked him to, or so I'm told. He said to give you all the cherry tomatoes we had for breakfast today, and nothing else. We knew you didn't like them, so we were disconcerted as well, but we couldn't disobey the master's orders __"

"Enough. I understand."

Oswald raised a hand, silencing the server, and dismissed him. Alone, once again, he

stared…

At the mountain of cherry tomatoes.

“……”

He gazed at them for a while.

Then, with his usual reticence, at least superficially, he spoke.

“Have I done something to anger my sister?”

~ Fin ~

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

In order to preserve the original reading experience of this manga section, the following pages have been reproduced in their original right-to-left reading order.

For the best reading experience, please click or tap here to skip to the beginning, then page backward through the manga.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

Oswald, I'm sorry! That was my fault!!
PU KU KU (SNRK)
TSUUUN (CROSS)
WATA WATA (PANIC)

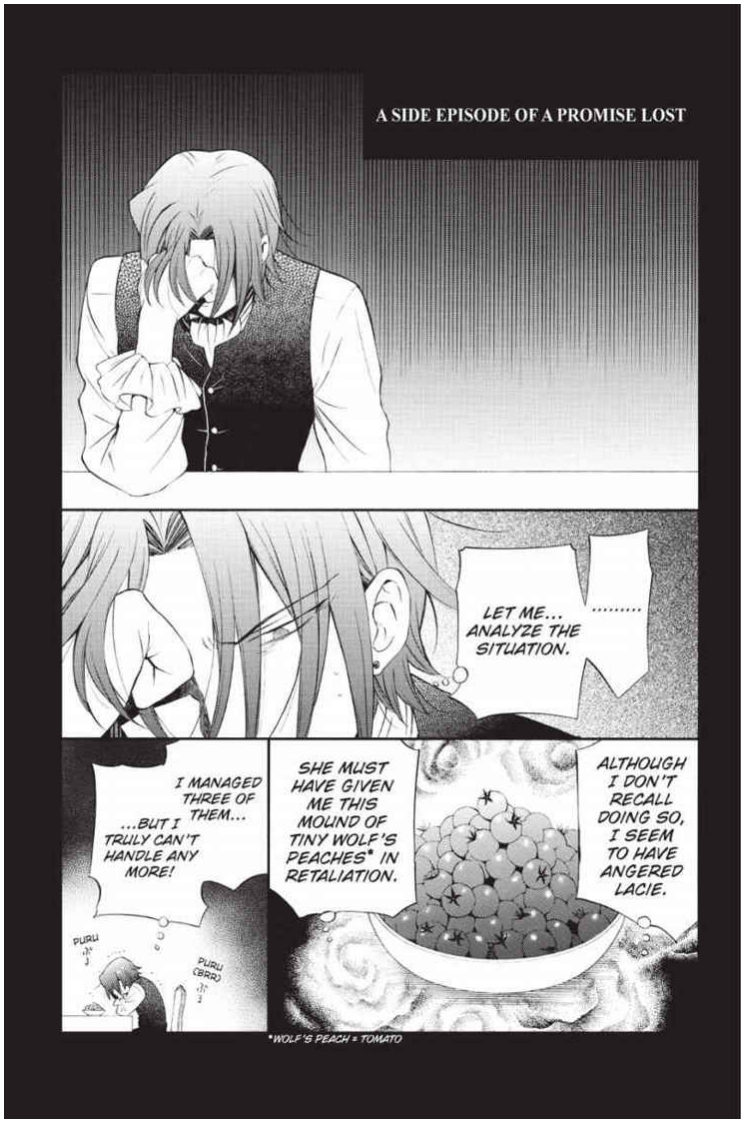
LINE UP EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN THE MANSION !!!
THIS VERY INSTANT !!!
...AND?
WHAT'S ALL THIS?
WE DON'T KNOW WHY, BUT OSWALD IS DISTRIBUTING SOMETHING BY FORCE.
GYAH
HA
ZURAAA (CROWD)
ONE PER PERSON
HEEEE HEEEE HAW HAW

BUT I'M SORRY!
LACIE TOLD ME I WASN'T ALLOWED TO DO A THING ABOUT THE TOMATOES.
IT'S TOO BAD I COULDN'T HELP, OSWALD.
YOU HAVE MY FULL SUPPORT, THOUGH!
WELL, I'M OFF TO SEE LACIE.
DAN (BANG)
KII (CREAK)
OSWALD, AREN'T YOU FINISHED EATING YET?

IF YOU WOULDN'T MIND...
...COULD YOU AID ME...
...IN CONSUMING THESE WOLF'S PEACHES?
.....
JACK.
I TENSED UP A BIT.
YOU'RE ALWAYS SO FORMAL...
AH HA HA...
HEE...
AH!
IS THAT ALL?

EEEEEH!? WHAT IS IT!? WHAT!?
.....NO. IT'S... NOTHING ...
PUI CHAMPU
.....JACK.
HM?
I MUSTN'T PULL YOU INTO IT—
OSWALD.
THIS IS...MY PROBLEM.
I'D BE GLAD TO HAVE YOU ASK A FAVOR OF ME.
YOU AREN'T PULLING ME IN.

OS-WAAALD.
WHAT SHOULD I...WHAT SHOULD I DO...!?
HE'S HAD A ROUGH LIFE AND CAN'T DISRESPECT FOOD.
EVEN SO, IT WOULD BE DESPICABLE ...
...TO WASTE FOOD, AND IN SUCH QUANTITY.
?
HALLO!
I STOPPED BY FOR A VISIT!
AH! SORRY. I KNOW IT'S A BIG PROBLEM FOR YOU.
(I KNOW!)
GO GO GO
"ALL IT WAS"
...??
I THOUGHT YOU LOOKED AWFULLY GRIM. WAS THAT ALL IT WAS?
AH HA HA HA!


A SIDE EPISODE OF A PROMISE LOST
LET ME... ANALYZE THE SITUATION.
.....
ALTHOUGH I DON'T RECALL DOING SO, I SEEM TO HAVE ANGERED LACIE.
SHE MUST HAVE GIVEN ME THIS MOUND OF TINY WOLF'S PEACHES* IN RETALIATION.
I MANAGED THREE OF THEM... ...BUT I TRULY CAN'T HANDLE ANY MORE!
PURU
PURU (BRRR)
*WOLF'S PEACH = TOMATO

The Story
of
Genuine Trust

ADORATION

The Perfect Gift

—Someone, somewhere, would die again tonight.

At night, the town was submerged in terror.

When the bell in the clock tower struck ten, all the passersby vanished, and no light escaped the tightly locked houses.

The whole town trembled in fear. Fear of the shapeless killer who arrived with the night.

“Now, then.”

Quietly, the detective, Ivel, began to speak to the person he’d invited to his office:

“Our man is elusive, and he looks different every time he appears. Unfortunately, at this point, we have only one clue to set us on the murderer’s track.”

With a sour expression, the guest—Police Captain Darius—asked:

“What clue might that be?”

“It’s…a pair of black leather gloves.”

—*Fruit of Uncertainty*, by Evil B.

1

It was a windy night.

A room in Pandora Headquarters. Gilbert Nightray stood by the window of his master Oz Vessalius's bedroom, looking up at the night sky. "The clouds are moving fast," he muttered.

There was a full moon that night, but its light kept being eclipsed by the black clouds passing in front of it. When he turned his gaze to the courtyard, he saw that the branches of the several trees planted there were tossing wildly in the wind. The pitch-black silhouettes of the trees swayed right, then left, scattering leaves.

In contrast, the room was quiet.

He could hear the window rattling softly as the wind struck it. The faint, regular sound of pages being turned also reached his

ears.

Gilbert turned.

From a table in the center of the room, the light of a silver candelabra softly illuminated the interior.

Gilbert was looking at Oz, who was sitting in a chair by the table, absorbed in a book.

Oz's legs were crossed, and he held a thick volume on his lap. He had one hand to his chin, and he seemed to be brooding as he silently followed the text.

Sometimes he'd touch his hair, but his eyes never left the book. As his hand turned the pages, the motion was so mechanical that it seemed almost unconscious.

His concentration is fantastic, as always.

Gilbert broke into a tiny smile, as if he was impressed. …But.

"Oz."

He knew he'd be interrupting Oz's reading, but Gilbert spoke to him anyway. Oz didn't respond.

Gilbert glanced at the tabletop. A white ceramic teacup sat there, close enough for Oz

to reach if he put out his hand. The tea Gilbert had poured half an hour ago was stone cold.

…Oz hadn't taken a single sip.

With a brief sigh, Gilbert said, "Oz" again, raising his voice a little.

As expected, there was no response.

This time, Gilbert kept speaking without waiting for a reaction.

"It's late. You should save the rest for tomorrow and get some sleep."

At that, after a pause, Oz said, "Nn……" It probably counted as a reply of sorts.

However, Oz kept his eyes on the open book, and he didn't raise his head. There was no change in the way he turned the pages, either.

Gilbert's shoulders slumped slightly. He left the window and walked over to Oz.

"Oz."

"Nn…"

"It's cold at night. You should get in bed."

"Nn."

“You can read the rest tomorrow, you know.”

“…Nn—”

“This is going nowhere,” Gilbert sighed to himself.

Oz was responding, barely, but the responses were clearly absentminded, and his heart wasn’t in them. His mind was deep in the world of the book. Gilbert remembered how Oz had come running up to him that evening, hugging a book to his chest.

“Elliot loaned it to me.”

As he spoke, Oz’s expression had been indescribably happy.

Elliot Nightray.

He was Gilbert’s younger foster brother, one year older than Oz.

Possibly because their first meeting had gone poorly, he and Oz had been on bad terms for a while, but by now they’d warmed up to each other significantly. Oz seemed pleased to have made a friend his own age. Gilbert thought it was a good thing, too.

Oz was probably reading the book so enthusiastically not just because it was

interesting, but because he wanted to finish it quickly so that he could talk about it with his friend.

Gilbert wanted to respect those feelings, but…

"Oz," he called again, raising his voice even further, trying to drag Oz's mind back to reality.

For his part, Gilbert wouldn't have minded standing here beside his master as he read, waiting until he finished his book.

On the contrary, he'd consider that time very pleasant indeed.

However.

It's going to be cold tonight. If he stays up late and makes himself sick…

Once he'd thought that, as a valet, he couldn't just let this slide.

However, the only responses Gilbert's calls provoked were listless, absentminded, and vague.

He hesitated, but, deciding there was no help for it, Gilbert steeled himself:

"Oz, read the rest tomorrow."

He stretched out an arm and took the book from Oz's hands, giving him no chance to argue. "Ah—" A small cry escaped Oz, as if he'd come to his senses. He blinked as though he had no idea what had happened, then turned disgruntled eyes on Gilbert.

"What are you doing, Gil? I'm at a good part."

"You can read it tomorrow. It's not like you have to return it right away."

"I'm the type who reads things in one sitting!"

"No. What are you going to do if you chill yourself and catch a cold?"

Speaking very plainly and carefully, Gilbert put the ribbon bookmark between the pages, then closed the book. He set it gently on the table. Oz sulked.

Generally, except for practical books on cooking and making tea, Gilbert wasn't in the habit of reading.

As a result, he wasn't particularly interested, but his eyes absently skimmed over the book's leather cover. He read the letters stamped on it. The title, and the name

of the author.

Fruit of Uncertainty, by Evil B.

No doubt it was a pen name, but “Evil”… That meant “harmful.” It sounded like a name that was terribly proud of its vices.

He was a bit concerned about the content, but if Elliot had recommended it, it wasn’t likely to be indecent. As he thought this, Gilbert made Oz—who still wanted to keep reading—get up from his chair and, with some difficulty, bundled him into bed.

Having burrowed under the down comforter, Oz had poked his face halfway out of the covers and was looking at the book as if he hated to be parted from it.

Watching him out of the corner of his eye, Gilbert turned to the table and blew out the candles in the candelabra.

Immediately, the room was swallowed by darkness.

The moonlight shone unsteadily into the room, broken by clouds.

In the darkness, he heard Oz stir and mutter a soft “Tch!” He turned a flat, eloquent gaze on Gilbert. Gilbert gave a

small, wry smile, then left the table, walking toward the door.

In front of the door, he turned back to the bed and spoke in a calm voice:

“Good night, Oz. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night,” Oz said, grudgingly.

With that voice in his ears, Gilbert set his hand on the knob, opened the door, and went out into the corridor. Perhaps because the hour was after midnight, it was deserted. Few of the lights in the rows of wall sconces were lit, and the corridor was submerged in the atmosphere of night.

With his back to the door to Oz’s bedroom, Gilbert tried to remember whether there was anything he needed to do before he went to bed.

He’d finished all the practical duties he had here at Pandora, and he couldn’t think of anything else that was urgent. At the rented apartment where he lived by himself in the older area of Reveil, the capital, there were lots of chores that had to be done before he slept, but while he was living at Pandora, there was nothing.

Maybe I should go back once in a while…

He hadn't even been by to air out the room lately. Things were probably getting pretty dusty.

Next time, he thought, absently, he'd at least go back and clean the place.

Then.

"_____!"

Gilbert, who'd been standing and thinking with his back to the door to Oz's room for a few moments, swiftly turned and opened the door.

Moonlight was streaming into the room.

"……?! G-Gil?"

"……Oz."

Oz had slipped out of bed and was standing at the table. He had a match in his hand and had been just about to light a candle.

Naturally, the book he'd borrowed from Elliot was tucked under his arm.

The abruptly opening door and the sight of Gilbert had startled Oz. He flinched, straightening up, and froze.

I knew it…

Muttering to himself, Gilbert heaved a long sigh. Oz looked uncomfortable, like a little kid caught in the act of playing a prank. He returned the book to the table and got back into bed. …Grumbling to himself as he did so.

* * *

Oz crawled back under the covers and lay there in the dark, looking up at the ceiling and muttering softly. *Well…it really* was *a good part.*

Fruit of Uncertainty. The book Elliot had loaned him. The name of the author had been a bit off-putting, but the story was fantastic.

It had been a long time since he'd read a book that had thrilled him so much. Set in the rough old town of an imaginary city, it was a story about a showdown between a detective and a mysterious killer. One man who committed a series of murders using artistic methods, and another who was tracking him down with brilliant reasoning.

Just remembering it made his heart leap, and the excitement flooded back.

……*Okay*, Oz thought, under the covers.

He'd gotten out of bed too soon last time.

He'd needed to wait at least five, no, ten minutes. Yes, he should have waited until he was sure Gilbert had really gone back to his own room before he got out of bed. Oz held still, listening carefully. Was Gilbert still out in the corridor, keeping an eye on him?

Since this was the second time, Oz was particularly careful: He stayed in bed for thirty minutes without moving a muscle.

Sure that Gilbert must have gone back to his room by then, Oz quietly slipped out of bed. Being particularly wary regarding the area around the door, he approached the table, then returned to the bed, holding the book and the candelabra. He set the candelabra on the shelf by the bed, lit it with a match, and got back under the covers, hugging the book.

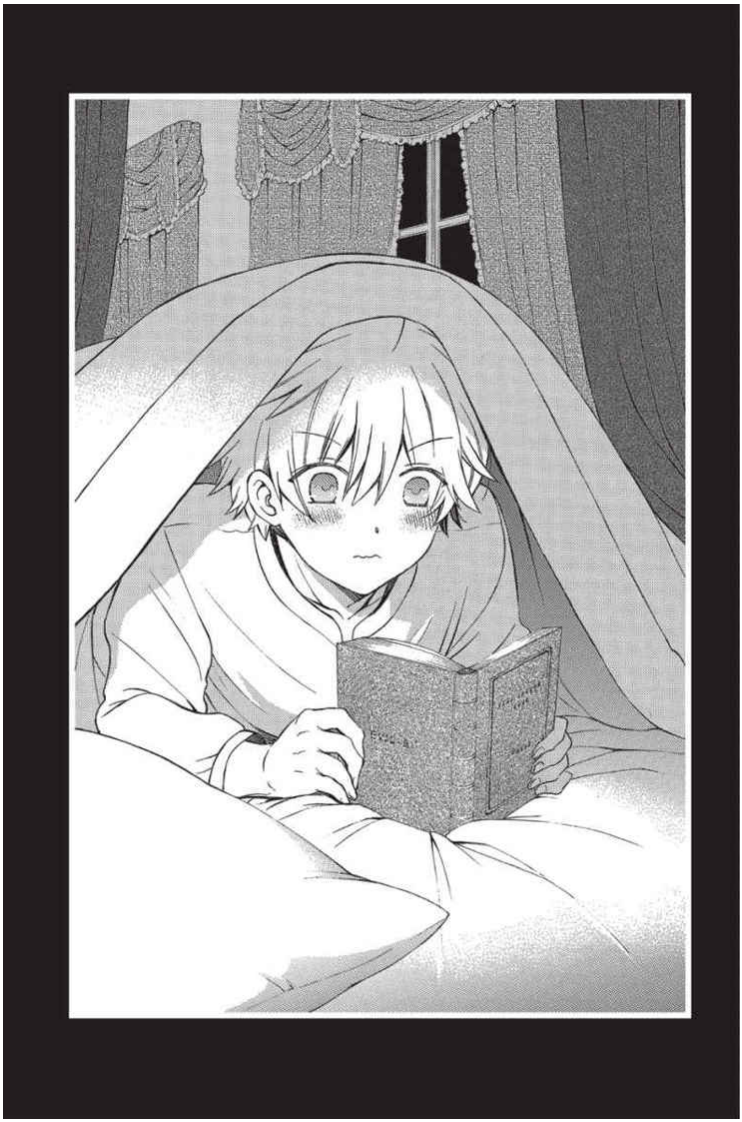
Pushing aside a big feather pillow, he lay down on his stomach and opened the book to where he'd left off. He gave an involuntarily huff of excitement.

In a moment, Oz was pulled into the world of the book.

By the time he turned the last page, the sky outside the window was tinged with morning light. Even after he'd finished reading, he couldn't lift his head from the book right away.

Even as he knew he'd have to put the book and candelabra back on the table or Gilbert would scold him when he came to wake him up, Oz's mind was drifting into a pleasant sleep. Then, as he lay on his stomach, dozing, with the closed book at his side…

Oz made a resolution.



2

MORNING, ONE WEEK LATER.

“Go shopping? Now? Right away?”

It was after breakfast. Gilbert, who’d been making tea in Oz’s room, blinked at the words he’d just heard, responding with questions.

“Right.” Oz nodded.

There were three people in the room at the moment: Oz, Gilbert, and Alice, who’d appropriated the bed and was asleep. She might have been dreaming about eating: She had a cheerful expression on her face and was gnawing at the pillow. They’d probably have to send it out later to be laundered.

Oz, who was sitting on the sofa, looked up at Gilbert. He was smiling happily.

Gilbert had been about to tilt the teapot, but he hesitated and thought a little.

“Oz. Let me make sure I’ve got this right. You don’t mean…you want to send somebody out shopping *for* you?”

“Of course not. *I’m* going, on my own.”

“I see,” Gilbert answered. Gazing into space, he mentally ran over the day’s schedule.

Fortunately, they didn’t have any pressing business just now.

As long as it didn’t take too much time, simply going shopping wouldn’t be much of a problem, Gilbert concluded. He nodded once. He resumed pouring tea into the teacup, then held it out to Oz.

“All right. Wait just a bit, Oz. I’ll go get ready.”

“……Get ready?”

Oz looked puzzled.

“I just need to grab my coat. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, you won’t need that.”

“I won’t? I suppose it is pretty warm today, but…”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m going by myself.”

Oz tossed off that line lightly but firmly. Gilbert couldn’t process what he’d said.

“You don’t have to come, Gil.”

Gilbert still couldn't understand what he'd just heard.

"And you'd better not follow me. I mean it."

As Oz delivered that declaration with a million-watt smile, Gilbert's mouth hung open.

* * *

The street's official name was Dodgson Street, but practically no one called it that.

It was a wide road that ran through the old part of town, a neighborhood inhabited mostly by common folk in a corner of Reveil, the capital. It was a jumble of all sorts of shops—groceries, sundries shops, secondhand clothing stores—lined up without any rhyme or reason.

The people who lived in Old Town called the road something else:

Hodgepodge Street.

The place certainly wasn't well-disciplined. It was overflowing with things and crowded with people, and as a result, trouble broke out many times every day.

However, the street single-handedly

supplied the common folk with food, clothing, and shelter. From cheap items of good quality to expensive items of poor quality, it was safe to say there was nothing the street didn't have. Day in and day out, it bestowed its blessings on everyone, from babes in arms to the elderly.

A place that was equally open to absolutely anyone, even to nobles— That was Hodgepodge Street.

"Wow…"

Oz stood at the entrance to Hodgepodge Street. It was just after eleven o'clock, almost lunchtime; the street bustled with people and was filled with clamor and noise. Surrounded by the dense heat and smell of the crowd, Oz breathed deeply.

Compared with the district of aristocratic residences where he spent most of his time, even the air seemed to taste different.

Oz had visited streets before that commoners used.

However, on those occasions, it had either been late at night or he'd just been passing through, and he couldn't really say he'd come into proper contact with them.

The street Oz saw now was completely different from those other times. Just standing around idly was enough to get him bumped into by all sorts of people. Naturally, none of them apologized—it was his fault for standing there and spacing out. He felt himself beginning to smile with eagerness and excitement.

Then:

Come to think of it, I wonder if Gil's behaving…

Oz remembered Gilbert, who'd been left at Pandora Headquarters with orders to stay there.

His objective for the day was to go shopping in Old Town.

There was one other important condition for today's outing:

Gilbert couldn't be there.

Right. Gil was the last *person I could've taken.*

…If this plan was going to work, at any rate.

Gilbert was a faithful valet, and there was no way he could disobey an order from Oz,

his master. However, when Oz had told him he'd be coming to this neighborhood, the area near the apartment where Gilbert lived alone, he'd immediately asked him to withdraw the order:

"Look, don't go out by yourself! Please! Anyway, that area isn't… The boulevards and the neighborhood where I rent my place aren't bad, but if you go just a little farther out, it can get pretty rough. Give it more thought—No, I won't tell you not to go, but at least take me with you…"

Gilbert pressed him, his expression earnest, but Oz thrust out a hand and spoke firmly:

"Nope. I'm going by myself."

"Why?! What for?!"

"Nn, it's confidential, sort of… Or maybe it's a secret."

"They're the same thing!"

Oz evaded, but Gilbert wouldn't back down easily, either, and the argument —*"Take me with you!" "No!"*—went on for a while. At that point, their squabble made Alice sit up in bed. She spoke, looking as if

she was still half-asleep:

"Oz, I don't know where you're going, but if they have yummy stuff to eat there, take me with."

"Sure, Alice. Let's go."

"WHY, Oz?!!"

Oz couldn't help snickering a bit at the memory. However…

"All right."

Abruptly, his face was taut and businesslike. Oz hadn't come here just to see the sights.

"Now I have to figure out how to find what I'm after…"

Right: He couldn't simply enjoy himself. He had a mission to complete, and he couldn't be careless.

I left Gil back at Pandora… My expedition partner is—

Oz glanced to the side.

There was Alice, looking around as if she was searching for something. *To everyone else, we probably stick out like a pair of sore thumbs*, he thought. There was no point in

worrying about it. For now, they had to search every inch of the street.

“Let’s get moving, Alice! Nothing’s going to happen if we just keep standing here.”

“Mm, that’s fine, but Oz…”

Nodding, Alice looked straight at Oz.

“I’m hungry. Feed me something.”

“…Ah……”

“Let’s see. Right now, I feel like eating meat. Get me meat.”

“You always feel like that.”

“Hmph. —Of course!”

Alice spoke as if she was bragging, and Oz gave a wry smile.

He reconsidered. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to fill their bellies before they started, even if they did it because she’d gotten the jump on him.

Fortunately, there were lots and lots of food stalls on the street. Appetite-whetting aromas wafted from every stall, and they heard the voices of barkers energetically attracting customers.

With Alice beside him, Oz began walking, wondering which stall to choose. …But Alice had already stopped in front of one.

“Step right up!” the owner’s voice greeted them. When Oz looked, he saw that the front of the stall was lined with skewers of grilled chicken that sent up fragrant smoke. As she gazed at the ranks of grilled skewers, Alice’s eyes were sparkling. Naturally, her mouth looked about ready to start drooling at the corners.

“You want this one?” Oz asked, just to make sure, and Alice nodded. However, her eyes promptly went to the stall that was doing business right next door.

“No, that one’s good, too.”

She pointed at a mountain of just-boiled sausages. Then, immediately lured by a different smell, she turned around, pointing to a butcher shop that was visible across the street. Maybe because it was lunchtime, the butcher shop was selling grilled meat from its storefront.

“Ohhh, I want to eat it *all*! Oz, this is a wonderful place!”

Drat, Oz thought. To Alice, the street at

lunchtime might as well have been an El Dorado.

Of course, if Oz had been able to buy her as much as she wanted, he would have loved to do it. However, today was—

“No. No way, Alice! Just one place. Pick one.”

“Why?!”

“Because there’s something more important than buying food. We can’t be extravagant, not today.”

Alice might have sensed a hint of severity in Oz’s words; she grumbled a little: “Hrnn.

“Oz… Only one, whatever we do, no matter what?”

“Mm-hm, one.”

“Hrrrrrrrrrrrrnn…”

Alice gave a long, long growl; she seemed thoroughly undecided. Then, from a short distance away, a deep voice called to them:

“Heeeey, you two! Kids! Not sure where to go? Pick my place!”

“???”

At the voice, Oz and Alice both turned to look, and then…

They saw…

“Oh, oh, oooooooooooooooooooooh…!!” Alice cried out in surprise and admiration.

Wow. Oz also caught his breath, involuntarily.

Hanging at that stall was a whole roasted pig.

It was a truly powerful sight, the sort that begged for a “Ta-daaa!”

The roasted pig seemed to have already had bits carved off it here and there, but most of it was still left. On seeing their reactions, the stall owner laughed loudly, smacking his shoulder with the blunt side of a big carving knife.

Alice shot over like an arrow and began bouncing around the roasted pig.

“*This*, Oz! I want *this*! This is it!”

Flustered, Oz walked over to her.

“Alice-san, Alice-san! He isn’t selling the whole thing.”

“If you can *eat* the whole thing, I sure don’t mind selling it to you.”

The owner spoke jokingly, then guffawed. *Oh, I wish you hadn’t said that!* Oz thought. And right then:

“—Oho. You think I couldn’t finish off that much meat, do you?”

Alice’s expression abruptly changed to a defiant smile. She crossed her arms, looking up at the big stall owner.

The owner probably thought she’d responded to his joke with one of her own. He opened his big mouth even wider, laughed coarsely, and said something else uncalled-for: “If you eat the whole thing, I’ll give it to you for free.”

A perilous voice that held the hint of a dangerous smile came from Alice’s mouth.

Baring her gleaming white teeth:

“Fu-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, well said! You *did* know who I was when you said that, didn’t you?! You’ll regret it! If you want to fill my belly, you’ll have to bring out two or three more of those. I’ll carve that into your foolish soul—”

“Wait, wait, Alice-san, wait! You, too, mister!”

Alice was wearing such an aura of gluttony that she seemed ready to devour anything she touched, but a split second before she leapt at the roasted pig, Oz managed to cut in.

“What are you doing, Oz?!”

As Alice yelled, Oz gave a sigh of relief.

Th-that was close…!

If he’d been a moment later, a horrific carnivorous banquet would have commenced in a corner of this Old Town street. Alice was watching Oz, looking put out. For his part, possibly because he’d been overwhelmed by Alice’s nearly bloodthirsty appetite, the stall owner’s forehead was greasy with sweat.

Alice seemed to want to say, *What’s wrong with accepting a fight he picked?!* Oz held up a hand to stop her and smiled at the stall owner.

“We just need two regular orders! Or, no, two for Alice, so…three orders total!

“……Uh, yeah.”

With an overawed nod, the stall owner

began carving the pork. Alice grumbled, dissatisfied. The owner squeezed sauce over the carved pork with a practiced hand, nimbly wrapped the orders in paper, then held them out to Oz and Alice. When Oz said, “Thank you,” the stall owner stuck out a hand.

Oz tilted his head slightly, puzzled. Then he took the hand, thinking the man must be asking for a handshake.

“Thank you very much.”

“Snrk!” The stall owner burst out laughing.

“Money, boy. Money. Don’t tell me you’re planning to eat for free.”

“Ah, I-I’m sorry!”

“What’re you, some pampered rich kid? Never gone shopping on your own before?”

The owner guffawed loudly.

Aaaaaagh, how embarrassing!

Even Oz had made a few minor purchases before. He’d shaken the man’s hand involuntarily, out of sheer carelessness. Still, somehow—It felt as if the owner had seen through to the sheltered upbringing he’d

received as a child of the nobility.

Red-faced, Oz searched the pockets of his trousers. He took one paper bill out of his wallet and handed it to the stall owner.

The owner took coins from the counter and put them on Oz's palm, saying, "There's your change. Thank ye kindly!"

Having gotten her meat, Alice was already almost finished with one order.

Oz gazed at the few coins in his palm; he seemed lost in thought.

"What's wrong, Oz?"

At Alice's puzzled voice, Oz answered a little self-consciously; his eyes were still on the coins. "I was just thinking, this is a first."

"A first? What is?" Alice looked blank.

"Nothing." Oz shook his head. "Let's go." He put the coins into his wallet, thanked the owner again, and moved away from the stall. He hadn't wanted the stall owner to hear the rest of what he was going to say.

Oz murmured in a small voice:

"This is the first thing I ever bought with my own money."

—Then.

Oz stopped, startled, and looked back.

“……?”

He saw people, people, people coming and going on the street. The confused hubbub leapt into his ears. He turned, looking around him. “Hmm…” Oz cocked his head. Alice was stuffing her face with roast pork, and as she spoke, her mouth was smeared with sauce.

“What now? You never settle down, do you.”

“It felt like we were being watched. Sorry, it’s nothing. All right, let’s find somewhere to sit down and eat. …Except, Alice-san, you’re done already, aren’t you. Um… Do you want half of mine? I’m not all that hungry.”

“Sure, I’ll eat it for you,” Alice answered instantly.

3

As a matter of fact, someone actually *had* been watching Oz.

A narrow alley opened off the side of the crowded, teeming street. Someone was leaning against the alley wall, breathing roughly. They'd hastily dived into the alley before Oz's eyes could catch them.

The alley was squeezed between tall buildings; it was a wretched place, practically a garbage dump. Very little sunlight filtered in, and a fishy stench hung in the damp air. Except for a few wandering rats and that lone figure, it was deserted.

The figure breathed harshly for a while, then muttered:

"…I thought he'd see me. That was close __"

They gulped. They messed with their bangs, trying to hide their face, as though attempting to avoid being seen, even in the

empty alley.

Yes, the figure was…

None other than Oz's faithful valet, Gilbert.

Gilbert shook his head, lecturing himself:

"No, I'm here because I had an errand to run. It wouldn't hurt anything if he did see me…"

Right, right. He nodded.

"I only came down to Old Town to check on my apartment, and since I was already in the neighborhood, I was wandering around the street. Then I just happened to see Oz. That means it's fine to get out there and walk tall. I have nothing to feel guilty about."

Even as he came to that conclusion, Gilbert cautiously peeked out of the alley, moving like a sneak thief, searching for Oz.

He didn't find him immediately, but he managed to spot his slight back as it disappeared into the crowd.

Oz seemed to be moving farther and farther down the street, taking Alice with him. Gilbert was still in the alley, and the distance between them was widening.

Shooing away the rats that were gathering around his feet, he slipped out of the alley into the street. He walked along, blending with the crowd, maintaining a perfect distance: not far enough to lose sight of Oz, and not close enough to be noticed.

Still… Why did Oz have to come to a place like this to do his shopping? Gilbert wondered, perplexed.

To Gilbert, who rented an apartment in Old Town, Hodgepodge Street was a very familiar place. Living alone, he was both indebted to it and fond of it. However, Oz was a son of the four great dukedoms, and it wasn't a suitable place for him to be.

Ahead of Gilbert, Oz stopped in front of a shop. When Gilbert saw that, he ducked into the shadow of a nearby lamppost, concealing himself.

No matter how you looked at it, he was a fine example of a shadow.

* * *

The customer was known as "the Prince."

Having given half of his own roast pork to Alice, Oz was feeling a little unsatisfied, and

he stopped by a greengrocer's.

He was thinking about buying some apples. Alice, who'd eaten two-and-a-half orders, still didn't seem full, so he'd buy for her as well.

When he consulted the contents of his wallet, he thought he could probably afford two.

Outside the greengrocer's, a man who seemed to be the shopkeeper was chatting with some regular customers. When he saw Oz and Alice, he spoke to them: "Ah, step right up. Pick whatever you like!" All the fruit displayed in front of the store looked nice and fresh.

The apples Oz had been looking for were piled up in a pyramid, and he found them right away. However, since he had the opportunity, Oz took a good look at all the fruit that was on display.

Living at the Vessalius mansion or at Pandora Headquarters, he almost never got a chance to see places where fruit was sold this way. Apples, oranges, apricots, grapes, figs, black cherries, pears, and so on and so on.

It was only fruit, lined up in no particular

order, but to Oz, it looked like a casket of jewels. Just the sight of it was enough to make his heart dance.

Alice kept reaching for anything and everything. As he admonished her—"Don't do that"—Oz pointed to a basket of strawberries. "Mister, how much are these strawberries?"

"Hmm? Oh, those are…"

The shopkeeper promptly told him how much a basketful cost, but Oz didn't know the market price, and he had no idea whether they were expensive or cheap.

To Oz, fruit had always been something that was delivered to the mansion and set on the table as dessert. *There's so much I don't know*, he thought. He wasn't about to get depressed over it, but it also wasn't something he could bring himself to be proud of.

I wonder if Gil knows all about things like this… I bet he does.

Gilbert's face rose in his mind. Gilbert lived by himself in a rented apartment in Old Town.

“You’re not one of the neighborhood brats, are you?”

The shopkeeper had spoken to him, and there was a smile in his voice. Oz scratched his forehead with a finger, embarrassed.

“Erm, is it that obvious?”

“Well, yeah. For one thing, the stuff you’re wearing looks first-rate.”

“Does it?”

Oz looked at his clothes, but he couldn’t see what the man was talking about.

“The only kid around here who wears duds that nice is the president’s tyke.”

“The president?”

“Of the street’s commercial association. He’s got a snot-nosed kid who always plays around here. You look like you’ve been brought up even better than him. Something about you says ‘quality.’ You’re some aristocrat’s son, aren’t you?”

“……Yes.”

Oz’s answer was timid. At that, the shopkeeper hemmed a bit and folded his arms, cocking his head as though something

had struck him as odd. As Oz watched the man, wondering what had happened, the shopkeeper noticed his gaze and laughed. “No, well…

“Come to think of it, there’s the Prince, too. Another guy who looks like he was brought up proper, like you—”

The Prince? Oz tilted his head, perplexed, and the shopkeeper said:

“Ah, he’s a regular at the shops around here; we nicknamed him that ourselves.”

“…The Prince of Old Town…”

As Oz murmured, the shopkeeper looked up and down the street, muttering, “Come to think of it, I haven’t seen him around for quite a while now.”

The Prince. What an odd nickname.

“What kind of person is he?”

“Let’s see… All I know is that he lives by himself here in the neighborhood. He’s got an eye for merchandise that’s the envy of any shopkeeper. He keeps his wallet shut real tight. He never buys stuff he doesn’t need. He’s so good at chores that a whole gang of housewives couldn’t beat him.”

Wow… Oz was very impressed.

“Well, if you want to hear about the Prince, these folks can tell you more. — C’mon in!”

Glancing toward the front of the store, the shopkeeper called to a few housewives who’d just entered.

The women were all carrying market bags, and they seemed to be in their twenties and thirties. One had a baby bound to her back. Unlike Sharon, his little sister Ada, and the other women of the aristocracy, there was a sense of practical, everyday life and an air of sturdiness about these women.

The shopkeeper went over to the housewives and said something to them. At that, the women eagerly surrounded Oz.

The woman who was carrying the baby spoke:

“So you want to know about the Prince, kid?”

“Yes,” Oz answered.

“For starters, the Prince is so good at shopping he’s famous for it. They say he’s a model housewife, and lots of girls actually do

use him as a role model."

"Why do they call him 'the Prince'?"

At Oz's question, the housewives' faces grew merry.

"Well, you see, he does live around here, but rumor has it that he's actually from someplace real posh. He doesn't put on airs or anything, but he feels like 'quality,' you know? Like he was brought up nice."

"My, now that you mention it, this boy feels like quality, too."

Complimented as an afterthought, Oz put on a perfect fake smile.

"Nobody knows who the Prince really is. He doesn't talk about himself at all. But—"

The housewife with the baby had begun to speak, but almost immediately, the woman next to her broke in and stole the initiative, as if insisting that she be allowed to talk.

"Right, but it isn't that he's unsociable. If we strike up a conversation, he'll make small talk with us about cooking and things. Quite a while back, he said, 'I live alone, so I'd like to learn some simple recipes,' and when I taught him a few easy ones, he was ever so

grateful. A few days later, he gave me some as a thank-you, and when I ate it, it was far and away better than when I made the same thing myself. I swear, I'm really no match for him."

At this point, she said, she was the student, and she smiled in a friendly way.

Wow… That guy's really amazing.

As Oz thought to himself, appreciatively, another woman picked up the thread, beginning to speak. "Me, too," she said.

"My old man doesn't bring in much, and when I was grumbling that the only tea leaves we could buy were the cheap sort, he taught me a trick for brewing delicious tea. When I brewed it that way, would you believe it? …From the way it tasted, you'd never have thought they were the same tea leaves. Do you know that one? First, you—"

As he listened, for a moment, someone's face almost appeared in Oz's mind.

Still, he couldn't imagine there were too many ways to brew really good tea. It was probably just a coincidence.

After the housewives had talked for a bit,

they all said the same thing the shopkeeper had, sounding lonely:

“We haven’t seen him in a while, though.”

“I see,” Oz said, to show he’d been listening, and then—

“Wha—? Whoa?!”

As he looked around, his eyes went wide.

He’d been listening to the housewives’ stories and hadn’t noticed, but while he wasn’t paying attention, a small crowd had formed around them. *What’s going on?!* Oz was bewildered. The majority were women holding market bags, but he saw a few who seemed to be employees from other shops, too.

“They’re the Prince’s fans,” the shopkeeper said, laughing.

“The kid says he wants to know about the Prince, so we’re telling him. Any of you want in on that?”

He attempted to draw in the people around them.

“Oh, no, I don’t really need to know all that much…”

Overwhelmed, Oz waved his hands, turning down the offer, but it was too late. Everyone began talking, and their voices broke over Oz like a tsunami.

They said…

They said the Prince could pick out the best bargain from merchandise lined up in a shop with a single cursory glance.

They said a merchant who'd tried to pawn a defective product off on him had confessed honestly after just one glare.

They said a shopkeeper who'd never once responded to attempts at haggling had brought down his price at one word from him.

They said—

They said—

They said——

At first, Oz had been impressed by the anecdotes that were brought out one after another, but partway through he began to feel as if he was listening to legends or folklore.

Someone had said, "A shop was jammed with customers, but when the Prince

appeared, they parted like the sea." If he took that one seriously, he'd have to believe the Prince was some sort of mystical sage.

One young woman spoke:

"He shows up in rough clothes, and he always wears a black hat. He takes awfully good care of it, and I'm sure it's a memento from somebody important to him—"

How much truth was there in these stories about the Prince, and how much was fiction? Oz had begun to take the tales with a grain of salt, but the mention of the hat caught his attention. *Huh?*

He'd heard that before, somewhere.

Isn't that…?

Another woman spoke:

"He's coolheaded and a man of few words, but he's no good with cats. I hear someone saw him being chased around, all teary-eyed —"

……*Yeah, I know that guy.*

It was his own valet, Gilbert, who rented an apartment in the neighborhood.

Oz's expression was beyond description.

At Oz's reaction, the shopkeeper asked, "What's the matter?" He sounded puzzled. However, Oz had no idea what to tell him. All eyes in the crowd focused on him. At the heart of the circle, Oz scratched his cheek with a finger in embarrassment, choosing his words as he spoke:

"Umm… I might know that person. I think."

The crowd buzzed.

The women's reactions were particularly dramatic. In the blink of an eye, they'd closed in on Oz and begun bombarding him with questions. Who was he? Why hadn't he shown himself lately? What was his name? Did he have a sweetheart? Where could they go to see him? Et cetera.

He's Gilbert Nightray, a son of the House of Nightray, one of the four great dukedoms, and my valet.

He couldn't possibly tell them the truth, Oz thought.

What sort of uproar would it cause if it became known that a person like that was living by himself in a neighborhood like this?

…And geez, Gil. You're really…

Inwardly, Oz spoke to Gilbert.

You're kind of a legend around here…

Did Gilbert know people were calling him "the Prince"? Oz was pretty sure he didn't. He responded to the questions that flew at him hard and fast by saying he didn't know all that much, either. The people looked disappointed, and he felt just a little guilty.

Some of them were eyeing him skeptically, and he thought it would probably be a good idea to leave, quickly.

"Alice! Alice, let's go!"

Pushing his way through the crowd, Oz searched for Alice.

When he finally managed to extricate himself from the group, he found her. She was holding a ripe white peach in each hand, and was just about to bite into one. "Wagh! Alice, no!" Hastily, Oz grabbed her hand, stopping her. From behind them, the shopkeeper laughed generously.

"Nah, it's fine. You can have those two, on the house."

"Huh? But…"

Oz looked bewildered. Alice bit into a peach, her face shining. The shopkeeper continued:

“Let’s see, then. In return, if you run into the Prince, tell him to stop by the shop again from me. I lay in good stock every day just to impress him. It’s discouraging if he doesn’t drop in every once in a while.”

The shopkeeper’s words were amiable, and it was obvious that the people of this street really liked Gilbert.

This was a side of him that Oz hadn’t known.

…Even today, Gilbert had been adamantly against his going to Old Town alone.

But.

Huh, he thought. *This is a good place, Gil.*

Oz and Alice left the greengrocer’s and began walking.

When Oz glanced over at Alice, she’d already finished the white peaches and was licking the juice off her fingers.

“Um, Alice-san?”

“Nn. What?” Alice looked up.

"……Where's mine?"

"Yours? Nowhere."

Alice's face was satisfied, with no hint of a shadow.

Oz's stomach rumbled.

* * *

A LITTLE WHILE EARLIER.

What's that crowd?

In the shadow of the lamppost, Gilbert was suspicious. The shopkeeper who'd been speaking to Oz was a man Gilbert knew well. In fact, he knew most of the people who ran shops in this area. If they noticed him and spoke to him, it would probably attract Oz's attention to him as well. He couldn't move carelessly.

Oz had begun talking to the shopkeeper. Then some housewives who'd stopped by the greengrocer's joined in, and in less than a few minutes, lots of people had gathered around Oz.

Oz was buried in the crowd, and he couldn't see him.

A little ways away from the group, Alice

was gazing at the fruit hungrily.

…It worried him.

Gilbert was very concerned.

Maybe I'll get…just a little closer… he thought.

In the instant just before he stepped out from behind the lamppost—

As if she'd sensed something, Alice, who'd been rummaging through the fruit, abruptly looked his way.

It was a near thing. Gilbert just barely managed to check himself, and in a lightning-fast burst of movement, he hid himself in the shadow of the lamppost again.

In an instant, he was soaked with sweat.

"……Hff, hff, huff…… Nn?"

Feeling a tug on the tail of his coat, Gilbert looked down. A boy of about ten was standing there, holding on to Gilbert's coat. He had blond hair that flipped out every which way, as if he'd slept on it wrong. His face looked innocent and naive.

His nose was running, and he gazed vacantly up at Gilbert.

For a kid from this neighborhood, he was wearing very nice clothes.

Gilbert had seen the kid around. He didn't know his name, but he was pretty sure he was the commercial association president's son.

Just then, the kid pointed at Gilbert and, without warning, opened his big mouth:

"Onii-chan, what're you doi—Mmf!"

Hastily, Gilbert put out a hand and covered the boy's mouth. The kid's eyes rolled wildly. Gilbert bent down, getting close to the kid's face, and told him, "Go away, okay?" He wasn't sure he'd gotten through, but although the kid looked blank for a little while, before long, he nodded.

…I guess he got it.

Gilbert patted his head lightly—*Good boy*—and straightened up. When, from the shadow of the lamppost, he stealthily returned his gaze to the greengrocer's, Oz and Alice (the latter with a white peach in each hand) were just walking away from the shop. Gilbert took out his pocket watch and looked at it.

It was noon, and many of the street's workers were out and about as well, but things would gradually calm down.

When that happens, it's going to be harder to blend into the crowd and follow Oz… I mean, I just happen to be walking in that direction myself, but still…

Even as he thought these things, straight-faced, Oz and Alice were getting farther away.

Gilbert was about to leave the shadow of the lamppost when he felt something pull on his coat.

When he looked down, the snot-nosed kid was staring up at him, hanging on to his coat.

"You're st…"

He almost yelled.

He's still here…?!

When Gilbert flinched, the kid looked at him curiously. Flustered, Gilbert put out a hand and gestured at him: *Shoo! Shoo! (Go away.)* However, the kid just kept gazing up at him.

If he didn't go after Oz and Alice soon,

he'd lose sight of them, but the kid was hanging on to the tail of Gilbert's coat, and he couldn't move. He tugged lightly on the coat and pointed at it, telling the kid, "Let go of this." However, the kid only looked up at him and didn't budge.

Making his voice as small as he could, so as not to attract attention, Gilbert spoke bluntly:

"…I told you, get your hands off my coat!"

Maybe he'd finally gotten through to him. The kid stared down at his own hands, holding the coat. *Hurry up and let go*, Gilbert willed, and then the kid suddenly drew his hands in, bringing the cloth of the coat up toward his face. Gilbert didn't even have time to ask him what he thought he was doing.

The kid pressed the coat to his face, and…

Hooooooooonk.

Tha—Th-th-th-th-that little… He just blew his nose on my coat—!!

It was practically a miracle that he didn't yell.

On reflex, he glared at the kid, but this

was just a kid, and he couldn't get mad at him even if he wanted to.

Gilbert bit his lower lip. His shoulders trembled.

"…Ugk, kuh, rrgh…!"

His eyes were a little bit teary.

4

“You know, this place is a lot more peaceful than I thought it would be,” Oz murmured.

Having left the greengrocer’s, he’d walked along, peeking into shops here and there.

Old Town. …Here, day and night, criminal organizations battled it out, illegal goods were traded, and mysterious women were pursued by bad men.

That, and enigmatic murderers carried out their secretive work.

This place should have been filled with trouble like that. …According to *Fruit of Uncertainty*, the book he’d borrowed from Elliot, anyway.

In the book, the detective Ivel—who, although he had an aristocratic guardian, ran a detective agency in Old Town—described the area this way. The words had made a particular impression on him. *Old Towns hold all the world’s good and evil, condensed*, he’d

said.

There was no way Oz wouldn't be interested after that.

There was no way he wouldn't have wanted to go.

That said… Oz smiled wryly.

"I guess stories are just stories, after all—"

Almost before Oz had finished speaking… Somewhere, he heard an astonished outburst from a crowd of people. It wasn't like the ordinary bustle of the city. He could hear screams in there, too, along with boisterous excitement. Oz looked around, searching for the source of the noise.

His eyes focused on something. Down the street, a crowd had gathered in front of the mouth of a fairly wide alley.

F-finally… Trouble?!

Shivering with excitement, Oz launched himself into a run.

Although it might not have been very commendable of him, inwardly, he was thrilled. After all, this was what he'd been waiting for.

Is it a syndicate battle, or an enigmatic killer, or a mysterious lady—?!

Reaching the edge of the crowd, he pushed his way in, calling "Excuse me, excuse me" over and over, working his way toward its heart.

"You've gotta be kidding." "How did *this* happen?" "Is it a fight? No—" "That lot again!" Hearing the voices of the onlookers convinced Oz that there was a really fantastic incident waiting just ahead. His cheeks flushed with rising expectation. Before long, he'd managed to maneuver his way through the crowd to the very front.

His field of vision opened up.

Okay! Trouble's broken out, and—?!

It was a gloomy alley.

The first things Oz saw were three rough-looking men.

And then…

"You first! Start jumping."

……*Huh?*

Oz's eyes went round.

In front of the men, in an arrogant pose,

stood Alice.

Come to think of it, when he thought back carefully, he had the feeling he'd stopped seeing Alice somewhere along the way, while he'd been looking into shops.

Alice was standing tall in the center of the alley.

The three men in front of Alice were standing in a neat, horizontal line, like students being scolded by a teacher. They were wearing tacky coats, and there were tattoos on the arms that stuck out of their sleeves. They were obviously ruffians.

All three men looked as if they'd just been beaten like carpets.

Their faces and bodies were covered in bruises.

Wha—Huh—Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh?!

Inwardly, Oz yelled.

The man Alice had ordered to jump gave a hoarse shriek; he looked as if he was about to cry. "Please forgive me!" Any tough-guy menace he'd had was gone without a trace.

Alice snorted.

“You people tried to do that ‘mug’ thingie to me first, remember? As if ‘Forgive me’ is going to cut it now! —Get moving. Jump.

“If you value your lives.” Alice broke into a superforceful, dangerous smile.

“Suh, spuh, sp-sp-sp-spare us!”

As if they’d be killed if they disobeyed, the three men began bouncing up and down.

Behind Oz, some of the spectators were giggling. From the conversations he overheard, Oz learned that these three were famous on the street as two-bit punks. The men were constantly causing trouble for people who lived in the area, and some residents had been victimized by them that very day.

Apparently Alice was the hero who’d vanquished them.

Shouts of encouragement flew Alice’s way, and some people were actively egging her on: “Give ’em some more, little lady!”

Oz couldn’t laugh. It was really and truly no laughing matter.

In the first place, Alice didn’t know anything about buying and selling, so how

had she known about mugging? Because Oz had told her.

After they'd left Pandora Headquarters, before they'd reached Old Town, he'd told Alice about it, along with other kinds of trouble they might run into there. He'd made his description funny, exaggerating and distorting a bit. Something about how "Mugging is a type of 'hunting' seen all the time in neighborhoods like this—"

But in any case.

He'd told her about it in order to make sure she took care not to get caught up in that kind of trouble.

I-I didn't tell you so you could do *it, Alice-san—!*

What a horrendous misunderstanding. … Or was it that he hadn't explained it right?

As the men kept hopping, their faces crumpled with tears, Alice pointed at them sharply.

"Yeah, 'mugging' is too slow. Give me meat, you lot!"

"A-Alice-Alice-Alice!"

Oz practically tumbled out of the front

row, hurrying to stand in front of Alice. When she saw him, Alice responded: “Oho.

“Oz, huh? Where were you, and what were you doing?”

“No… That’s my line…”

As Oz spoke, his shoulders slumped.

* * *

AFTER THAT.

To get Alice to let them go, the men brought out what little money they had, but Oz politely refused it. In exchange, perhaps, or possibly as a thank-you to Alice for having punished the hooligans, the spectators gave her a mountain of meat dishes.

She was treated as a real hero.

“Here, Oz. I’ll share with you, just this once.”

As she walked down Hodgepodge Street with Oz, hugging all the meat to her chest, Alice held out a skewer of grilled chicken.

She was obviously in a good mood. “Thanks…” Oz said, accepting it with a complicated expression on his face.

Apparently, in that last incident, the men

really had been the ones to start trouble with Alice, and when he thought of what could have happened if she hadn't been so strong, he was just glad she was all right. Besides, as the people on the street had pointed out happily, as far as results were concerned, Alice's actions had proved to be a good deed.

However.

I did want something *to happen, but I never thought Alice would* make *it happen…*

He completely hadn't expected it.

Well, no, you could probably say that, when traveling with Alice, you could fully expect to see things you weren't expecting.

"Nom-nom-nom-nom-nom-nom-nom… Mm, yum!"

Alice was enthusiastically stuffing her face with a grilled skewer, and she seemed blissfully satisfied, as though she'd already forgotten the men.

As he walked along next to Alice, Oz also brought his skewer to his mouth.

"—Oh, you're right. It really is good."

Alice kept silently munching on grilled skewers, taking them out of their paper

wrapping one after another.

It happened just about the time the number of skewers was set to go into double digits. Alice's stomach must have calmed down a bit: The pace at which she was eating slowed, but even so, she had a new skewer in her mouth when she spoke:

"And? What about you? Did you find what you came for?"

"Huh?"

Oz looked blank. Alice continued, her tone casual:

"If you haven't yet, then I suppose I'd better start helping you seriously."

"……Huh?" Oz repeated.

Alice glanced at him.

"You're looking for those, right? Gloves like the black leather ones in that book. To give to somebody."

"_____?!"

This extremely frank statement bewildered Oz.

Questions swirled through his mind: *Why?! How?!* He hadn't told anybody about

his reasons for coming to Hodgepodge Street. He'd kept his plan secret the entire time. Strictly. Carefully. He'd been sure he hadn't let anything slip. And yet… Why?

Could she possibly have *deduced* it from some incredibly faint, infinitesimal clue?

If she had…

Is Alice actually a great detective?!

Involuntarily, Oz drew closer to her.

"How do you know about that, Alice?!"

At that, she answered:

"You went to bed early last night, remember? When I went to your room, you were talking about it in your sleep.

"As plain as day," Alice said, finishing him off.

……

I'm an idiot.

Oz went down in flames.

5

Oz, where are you?!

It was after lunchtime, and Gilbert was walking rapidly along Hodgepodge Street. His expression was tense with impatience.

He'd forcibly yanked his coat out of the boy's hands, and the kid had burst into tears; while he was soothing him, he'd lost sight of Oz. *He can't have gone very far yet*, he thought, and he was looking into the shops all down the street with a feeling as if he was praying.

That said, as long as they kept to Hodgepodge Street, he wasn't all that worried. He'd said it was dangerous to come to Old Town, but there were lots of people in this area, and, maybe as a result, it was safe. If it hadn't been, Gilbert wouldn't have rented an apartment for himself nearby.

The place it wasn't all right to go was a corner of Old Town.

It was an area known as “the Bottom,” and it wasn’t all that big. It was the dark side of Reveil, an area that was practically lawless, where the neighborhood’s very poorest and those who couldn’t live in ordinary society anymore tended to wind up.

At each and every one of the shops he stealthily peeked into, he struck out. If he still hadn’t found Oz after he’d checked a few more…

No, he can’t possibly have gone to the Bottom…but…

If he only knew what Oz had come here to buy, he thought, he’d be able to narrow down the possible destinations.

The rising impatience made the buzz in his chest grow stronger.

Be at the next one, Oz!

His excuse for himself—that he just happened to have an errand here—had vanished from his mind.

The next place Gilbert peeked into was a secondhand clothing shop.

It was a comparatively large store for Hodgepodge Street, a popular shop with a

wide selection of merchandise. It also seemed to have a lot of employees.

Praying that Oz would be in the shop, he peeked through the door, quietly, so as not to be noticed.

……*There he is!*

Oz was unexpectedly close. He was standing just inside the shop, with his back turned toward the door, and Alice was a short distance away from him. Beyond Oz were two young men who seemed to be employees.

Oz hadn't noticed him yet, but there was no telling when he might turn around. Gilbert hastily pulled his head back out. He held his breath.

Faintly, from inside the shop, he could hear voices in conversation.

* * *

It was all quite simple.

"……Ah. The guy they call 'the Prince' or whatever it is."

Oz had brought up the Prince at the secondhand clothing store, too, and the young employee had responded in a bored

voice.

Oz's shoulders twitched. He'd sensed the barbs in the man's words.

Oh, he thought. *That might've been a mistake.*

The young employee, who seemed like a frivolous type, continued without noticing Oz's slight reaction:

"Yeah, y'know, I haven't seen him around lately. Not that that's bad news."

"You said it."

Another employee who'd been straightening merchandise nearby joined the conversation.

"He takes too much time to decide what he wants. He's a pain."

"That he is. I don't get why people make such a fuss over that guy."

"Same here. Looking at that gloomy mug of his ticks me off."

"And all the women squealing about him… Are they stupid or what? What's so great about him anyway?"

The two employees were enthusiastically

badmouthing Gilbert and neglecting Oz. Although he didn't let it show in his expression, Oz felt annoyance building inside him.

He wanted to complain, but it was partly his fault for bringing up the subject without giving it much thought, so he choked it down.

Old Town and Hodgepodge Street held a Gilbert he didn't know. Learning about him was fun, and Oz had brought him up everywhere he'd gone. Between leaving the greengrocer's and finding this used clothing store, Oz had asked about "the Prince"—Gilbert—at several shops.

Every one of them had spoken favorably of him. The people on this street liked Gilbert so much, it made him a little jealous.

Yes, it was quite simple:

Since that was the case, it wasn't odd that there were also people who harbored ill feelings about it.

Ah… I should've known better…

Secretly, Oz was sorry he'd asked. He decided it would be better to hurry and find

out whether they had any black leather gloves for sale, then leave the shop.

The place was crowded with clothes, and Alice, who'd come in with him, was wandering through the shop, looking around curiously.

The two employees were continuing their conversation, peppering it with unpleasant smiles. Put simply, these two were jealous of Gilbert's popularity with women. Oz didn't want to talk to them, and he looked around the shop, searching for another staff member to ask.

"When the tavern girls collared that guy and forced him to drink, one watered-down round was enough to wipe him out. That's just sad. How lame can you get?!"

The words hadn't been directed at Oz and Alice, but the voice was so loud they couldn't help but hear.

…*Ignore it. Just ignore it*, Oz told himself, silently. For now, he started walking, beginning to move away from the pair.

The employees' voices grew a bit louder.

"Oh, and by the way, I heard something

funny. Next time they see that jerk in the tavern, some guys are planning to make him drink himself senseless, then take him someplace private. Somebody's gotta teach him a lesson. Show him if he gets too full of himself, he's gonna get hurt!"

The two employees burst into coarse laughter.

———.

Oz stopped. He turned around. He walked up to the two, his footsteps sharp, and stood in front of them.

He looked straight at them. His gaze was quiet—Or rather, ice cold.

At the pressure in that gaze, even though he hadn't actually glared at them, the employees flinched back.

However, they soon broke into dry smiles —"…Yeah? What?"—and acted as if they were ready to fight.

Oz took one small, deep breath.

"Listen. It's true that he can't hold his liquor, and he's tried and failed to quit smoking lots and lots of times, and he cries pretty easily, but he's important to me. You

can talk about him behind his back all you want, but if you do anything weird to Gil—"

His tone was calm and very polite. However, it held a blade of clear, serious anger.

"I'll never forgive you."

Oz was a head shorter than both of them, but at his words, the employees muttered in mingled bewilderment and fear. Oz stared at them steadily for a little while. Pinned down by his force, the employees took a step back and spoke, sounding flustered:

"Wh-what gives, all of a sudden? …What are you to that guy…?"

"Me? I'm—"

Oz thought about what answer he should give, and immediately hit on the perfect word.

Putting his hands on his hips, he puffed out his chest and declared with dignity:

"I'm—his guardian!"

Oz looked satisfied.

Maybe they hadn't expected the word: The two employees were dumbfounded.

Watching the two of them out of the corner of his eye, Oz raised his voice, calling for Alice. She came trotting out of the depths of the shop.

“What?” she asked.

“Let’s go, Alice,” Oz told her, simply.

“…Nn? Are you sure? Don’t you need to look for that thing?”

“I don’t feel like buying anything from this place anymore,” Oz said, flatly.

Oz took the lead, leaving the secondhand clothing shop a step ahead of Alice. True, as a used clothing shop, it was the place that was most likely to sell leather gloves. However, he was sure they’d find them for sale somewhere else if they looked.

Oz and Alice left the shop.

Then, just outside, they came face-to-face with someone unexpected.

“—Why, *hello* there, Oz-kun and Alice-kun. Fancy meeting *you* here.”

Oz blinked a few times. Beside him, Alice pointed: “You’re—!” The someone wore a cloak and was leaning on a swordstick; he raised the stick in a light salute, smiling

brightly. “Good afternoon. ♪”

Oz called his name:

“Huh…? Break?”

It was true. Standing right there…

Was someone who brought the question “Why here?” to mind: Xerxes Break, in person.

Although it was ordinary for him to appear in unexpected places, Oz couldn’t imagine why he’d be on this street.

“Why are you here, Break?”

At Oz’s question, with a significant look, Break began to speak: “Well, you *see*…” However, before he could continue, Alice spoke up cheerfully:

“I bet you’re here for the snacks, too, you old clown. This really is a magnificent place!”

“…He isn’t you, Alice.”

Oz looked mildly appalled. Then:

“Oooh, it’s Zeke-sama!”

Someone called out from behind Oz. It was a young woman’s voice. When Oz turned

around, several women in gaudy clothes were standing there. *Zeke?* Oz cocked his head, puzzled.

The women waved at Break and ran up to him. As they passed Oz, the floral fragrance of perfume drifted behind them. When Oz turned back, the women had surrounded Break and were talking to him in an overly familiar manner.

Break was greeting them amiably: “It’s been a long time.”

“It truly has, Zeke-sama! Honestly, you never come by the shop.”

“Ha-ha-ha, my apologies.”

“Mama’s lonely, too. You will stop by today, won’t you? We’ll give you all sorts of extras.”

“Well, *well*. Hmm, what should I do?”

“The shop opens in the evening. Do come.”

At that, the women moved away from Break and left, waving and winking at Oz as well.

Gradually, Oz understood. The women probably worked at a tavern somewhere on

this street. In other words, Break was one of its regular customers. In that case, Break had come to the street today in order to put in an appearance at the tavern—

Sensing that Oz seemed to want to say something, Break spoke, smiling:

"You will keep this a secret from my lady, won't you?"

"…So it's something you can't tell Sharon-chan about. Not only that, but 'Zeke'… You go there under an assumed name? How about that…"

As he spoke, Oz's eyes were reproving. When he continued, his voice was even more ironic and slightly scornful:

"'We'll give you extras,' huh? I *see*."

Alice, who was standing beside Oz and Break, listening to their exchange, grumbled: "Hrrrnnn?" Apparently she didn't quite understand what they were talking about. Although he would have been hard-pressed to explain, Break didn't seem at all abashed.

"I suppose you could call it a *mature* pleasure. Ah, you children are a bit young for that. You mustn't, Oz-kun."

Oz grew mildly irritated at finding himself treated like a child. With a taunting expression, he said:

“Listen to you. Ahh, you know, maybe I *will* tell Sharon-chan.”

“My, *my*. That *would* be a problem.”

Although he said it would be a problem, as Break spoke, his gestures indicated that it wouldn’t really be anything of the sort.

Then, his expression grew a bit thoughtful. In the tone of one speaking in riddles, he asked Oz a question:

“Do you know where ‘information’ tends to collect, here in Reveil?”

“…Information? What sort?”

Oz hadn’t expected the question, and all he could do was answer with one of his own. Break lowered his voice a bit, so that it would blend in with the noise from the crowd.

“For example, in a corner of this street, there’s a tavern. Its proprietress is so influential that there’s no one in underworld society who does not know her. Her intelligence network reaches into every

corner of aristocratic society, and it's said no information fails to find its way to her."

"……Huh?"

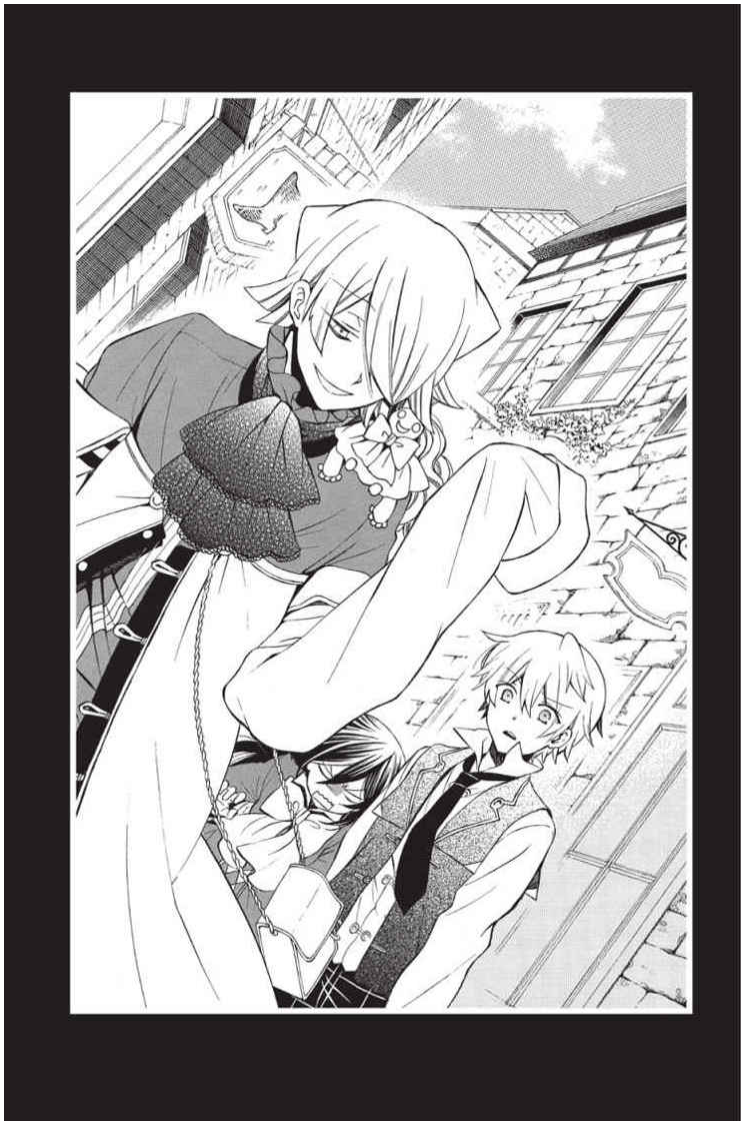
"The ladies who work at her tavern have secured the favor of many nobles, as her pawns. 'We'll give you extras' is a code phrase…meaning that new information has come in."

"_____"

Oz couldn't find a response. He swallowed involuntarily.

"…Wouldn't it be marvelous if that were true?"

Break smiled significantly, mischievously, as he twirled his swordstick.



Oz glared at Break, thinking he'd been teased again. However, Break's tone and expression were vague, and it was impossible to tell whether it had really been just a joke, or whether he'd disguised the truth as a jest. As he realized he couldn't match Break in this sort of battle, Oz's shoulders sagged.

"…Never mind. I'll pretend I didn't see you, Break."

"That would be quite helpful."

"All right. I'll be going, then."

Oz waved to Break, turned his back on him, and walked off with Alice.

* * *

As Oz's form grew smaller with distance, Break murmured quietly.

Turning to look at a narrow alley beside the secondhand clothing store, he said:

"…*Now*, then. I think I'll go loan him a handkerchief."

6

In the alley Break had turned toward…

He got angry for my sake. Oz did. My master…got angry…for me…

As a valet, how could he not be delighted about that?

Gilbert leaned against the alley wall, basking in the emotion. Oz's voice rose again in his mind:

"If you do anything weird to Gil—"

His voice had held real anger.

When he'd heard Oz's words in front of the secondhand clothing store, for a moment, he'd very nearly forgotten himself and run to him.

However, seeing Oz and Alice preparing to leave the store had brought him back to his senses, and he'd hastily dived into a nearby alley.

They probably hadn't noticed him.

“If you do anything weird to Gil… I’ll never forgive you.”

Oz’s voice played over and over in his mind, like a refrain.

As a valet who served a master, could there be any words he would have been happier and more grateful to hear?

He was glad from the bottom of his heart that Oz was his master.

His smile was soft, and the corners of his eyes grew hot as tears of joy welled up. Then Gilbert gasped, and the smile vanished.

And even so, that master gave me an order, and I’ve…!

The air that had brimmed over with happiness grew dull and depressed. He’d gone against Oz’s orders and come to this neighborhood. Gilbert’s conscience weighed heavily on his back. *I’m so… I’m such a—!*

He held his head, writhing, and an anguished cry escaped him: “Uwaaaaaaaaah!”

Just then:

“Tearing up, then writhing in agony… You’re a busy fellow, *aren’t* you, Gilbert-

kun.”

“……?!?!”

At the sudden voice, Gilbert turned as if he’d been stung. His eyes were wide and round.

“B-Break?! Why—”

Why are you here? Gilbert had been about to ask, but Break stuck out his swordstick, forestalling him, and he swallowed the words. “I’d rather not have the same conversation twice,” Break told him. Gilbert had no idea what he was talking about.

As Gilbert looked discombobulated, Break glanced from the alley to the street and continued:

“Oz-kun left. Shouldn’t you be going after him?”

“……!”

Gilbert had nothing but questions.

Why was Break here? Why did he seem to know what was going on? However, this wasn’t the time to grill him about it. If he failed to watch over his master after he’d committed the crime of disobeying his order, things would be truly hopeless.

“Thanks,” he told Break, simply, then broke into a run.

As he passed Break, a white silk cloth danced in front of his eyes. On reflex, he caught it. It was a handkerchief.

“Wash it and return it later, please. Your nose is running.”

Red-faced, Gilbert pressed the handkerchief to his nose and raced from the alley.

He didn’t hear Break’s final murmur:

“I wonder if Gilbert-kun will be all right… Now, then.”

7

The two of them had been parentless children from the same orphanage.

New orphans came to the facility at different times, and they left for new homes at different times as well, and so, although the pair had been at the same orphanage, the time they'd spent together had been very brief. There were many children who'd spent longer together than they had.

As a result, Ivel had forgotten the boy who'd been with him for that short time.

…Until the very last moment.

The climax of the story.

Ivel the detective's brilliant deductions had finally brought the murderer to bay, and he was mortally wounded by the guards' bullets. It happened in Old Town, in a decaying backstreet like a refuse dump.

Ivel walked up to the murderer, who lay

in a pool of blood, his life nearly gone.

Then he spoke to him.

The murderer had been a master of disguise. Why, then, had he never removed his black leather gloves? They'd provided his pursuers with an important clue. Then, Ivel revealed his reasoning: He believed that the murderer had wanted to be pursued and discovered.

However, with a hoarse laugh, the murderer rejected the detective's theory. "That couldn't be," he said.

As he spoke, the murderer raised his head from the pool of blood.

For the first time, the detective and the murderer were face-to-face.

Then, in him, Ivel saw…the shadow of the boy from the orphanage with whom he'd parted so long ago.

The boy had spent a very brief time at the orphanage with him. His name was Arrond.

With that, Ivel remembered everything.

They'd been close in age, and they'd often played together. Once, Ivel had helped out at a butcher's shop in Old Town, and with his

very first wages, he'd bought a pair of black leather gloves…and had given them to him.

He'd told Arrond there was no real meaning to it. He'd accidentally bought the adult size, he'd said, and they didn't fit his hands, so he was giving them to him. However, Arrond was no different, and when he'd put the gloves on his hands, the size was all wrong.

Arrond had looked troubled, but Ivel had laughed and told him they'd fit once he grew up.

It was a trivial anecdote from a distant night.

Then the murderer left his last words:

"It's strange, isn't it? Even I don't understand. I abandoned everything, became something who did nothing but steal human lives. Even so, even after I'd thrown everything away, I couldn't get rid of these leather gloves. I don't know why. I don't even remember how I got them."

The murderer looked at Ivel, and his expression was as young as it had been back then.

“Ah, you were right, master detective. I must have wanted you to find me.”

Ivel knelt in the pool of blood, hugging the corpse to his chest, and howled.

There the tale ended.

* * *

Over Hodgepodge Street, the sun was well into its journey down the sky.

“…They’re nowhere.”

They’d walked from one end of the long street to the other. Oz sat on an old, worn bench by the roadside; his expression was a bit dejected.

Alice sat next to Oz, licking a lollipop. Oz had bought it for her because he’d felt guilty about dragging her all over the place.

“I thought it would be pretty easy to find a shop that sold leather gloves.”

“Want to go back to that one store?”

Alice meant the secondhand clothing store where they’d heard Gilbert insulted. It probably was the best possibility.

Even so, with no hesitation, Oz shook his head.

“No way. I can’t give Gil something I bought at a place like that.”

After he said it, he realized it was the first time he’d said he was looking for a present for Gilbert.

He’d kept that a secret the whole time, and not only from Gilbert: He hadn’t told a soul.

Not even Alice.

Still, although it must have been the first Alice had heard of it, she didn’t react. Maybe she’d already heard that much when he was talking about the black leather gloves in his sleep. …Or maybe she just wasn’t interested, and was concentrating on eating her candy.

Oz scratched his cheek, a little embarrassed. He looked up at the slanting sunlight and repeated the words to himself:

“Right, I’m giving them to Gil… That’s the plan.”

The idea had hit him in the midst of the emotion and excitement he’d felt when he finished reading the book he’d borrowed from Elliot.

The black gloves Ivel, the detective, had

given Arrond, who'd become a murderer. Their fates, bound together after long years by that present from childhood.

"There's no real meaning to it.

"I accidentally bought the ones for adults, and they didn't fit my hands."

As he'd read, it had felt to Oz as if Ivel simply said these words to hide his embarrassment.

It hadn't been stated in the book, but he thought Ivel had probably wanted to use the first money he'd earned by himself on a present for someone.

However, he hadn't known what sort of reason to give, so he'd come up with a childish, lame excuse.

In aristocratic society, presents were an everyday occurrence, and were sometimes even given as greetings. Except for the ten-year gap when he'd been in the Abyss, Oz had given Gilbert a present on his birthday every year. Those presents hadn't been casual, greeting-type presents. They'd had actual feeling behind them.

However.

Strictly speaking, the power behind the presents came from the House of Vessalius, not from Oz himself. Oz had never given Gilbert something purchased with money he'd earned on his own.

After reading the book, this had begun to feel like a huge difference to him.

"……Haaah."

He leaned back into the bench, giving a little sigh.

Sensing eyes on him, he glanced over at Alice, who sat beside him. She was watching him, her lollipop still in her mouth.

He'd thought she must have gotten bored, or tired, or sick of being dragged around, but this didn't seem to be the case.

All Alice's eyes said was, *Well? What next?*

Oz looked back at the buildings that lined the street.

Then, as if talking to himself, he murmured:

"It's a little far, but we could try going to the place I heard about."

The young man who'd worked as a clerk

at the shop where they'd bought the lollipop had told him about it, a little while ago.

Oz had asked him if there was any place other than Hodgepodge Street that might sell leather gloves. The young man had told him that, if you walked west from the street for a little ways, there was an alley with rows of street vendors. If they'd searched Hodgepodge Street and hadn't found what they were looking for, going there was about the only thing left to try.

…*But*, the youth had warned them, lowering his voice:

The alley with the stalls was close to a dangerous area known as the Bottom of Old Town.

Since that was the case, the young man had told them to make sure they stayed away from it.

It's all right. I know. …Okay.

Having made up his mind, Oz got up from the bench, turned to Alice, and spoke:

"Let's go, Alice."

They set off, walking side by side. They heard the shops' barkers attracting

customers, and the hum of voices from the busily milling crowd. In the bustle, Oz abruptly heard an animal's growl—or rather, a human voice that sounded like a growl—and he looked in that direction.

His eyes found the back of a big man who probably weighed five or six times as much as Oz did. The big man was standing on the other side of the street, next to a cart piled high with cargo, and he was yelling something, nearly howling.

A lollipop lay on the ground by the man's feet. It seemed to be broken in half and coated with dust.

Alice snorted at the sight.

"A great big man, fussing over dropped food. That's ridiculous."

Oz nodded slightly, then seemed to remember something:

"Huh? But Alice, a little while back, when you dropped that spareribon the floor, you —"

"It's fine if *I* do it."

Alice spoke flatly, as if it was only natural.

This was very like Alice, and Oz chuckled.

He felt as though some of the tension had gone out of his shoulders.

He looked up at the sky. It was getting close to sunset.

He thought about Gilbert, back at Pandora Headquarters. It would be mean of him to stay out too late, on top of ordering Gilbert to stay there. His valet was a worrywart at the best of times, and he was probably waiting anxiously for him to come home.

I'll head back really soon. —I'm sorry, Gil!

* * *

Meanwhile, as his master was apologizing to him this way, Gilbert was…

"Uh, erm… Well."

"Y-y-youuuuuuu, you just ran right into me, and my—MY!—precious, sweet li'l lolly fell on the dirty groooooooooound! Wh-wh-what're you gonna DO about it, huuuuuuuuuh?!"

…Was currently behind the cart, being badgered by the big man.

It had happened when he'd seen Oz and Alice leave the street, heading west, and had hastily started to follow them. Gilbert had

been in a hurry. There was a particularly rough area to the west of Old Town. If it looked as though Oz and Alice were heading toward it, he'd have to stop them before they went in.

As, thinking this, he hurried out from his hiding place, he'd crashed into a big man who'd had a lollipop in his hand. He'd gone flying, ending up right back behind the cart again. He'd rolled on the ground and banged his back.

When, feeling dizzy, Gilbert had turned his gaze to the big man's feet, he saw the lollipop, broken in half and lying on the cobbles.

Gilbert got up. He was tall, but a thick voice bellowed down at him from even farther up:

"Apologiiiiiiize, *apologiiiiiiize*!"

"—I'm sorry. Use this to buy another one."

He had to hurry after Oz.

Pushed into motion by that thought, Gilbert took some coins from his wallet, holding them out to the big man as he passed him.

However, his hand was roughly smacked away.

Coins scattered across the cobbles.

"*Whaaaaaat* is with that attitude, huuuuuh?! Do you actually feel sorry?! *Do yooooooooooou?!*"

Gilbert's behavior seemed to have poured oil on the big man's wrath. Even if he had been to blame, he thought, he'd gotten pulled into something troublesome.

"And anyway, what're you apologizing to *me* for?! Apologize to the *lollyyyyyy*! Poor li'l thing, all broken and covered in duuuuust! Get down on your *knees*, on the *ground*, and *APOLOGIZE WITH TEARS IN YOUR EYES*! 'I'm terribly sorry, lolly!'"

The man's voice was dead serious. It was filled with rage, and also with grief for the broken candy.

…*What's wrong with this guy?*

A sense of amazed disgust was spreading through Gilbert's heart.

He knew he'd been at fault, but the big man's language had reached the realm of the absurd.

He didn't have time to waste on a lengthy exchange. He was going to lose sight of Oz.

Although he seemed calm on the surface, inside, Gilbert's chest churned with impatience, and his thoughts raced uselessly.

I have to hurry and follow Oz. This is no time to be messing around like this. But it was my fault he dropped his lollipop, and I need to apologize and have him forgive me… No, I did *apologize and I said I'd pay for a replacement, so why is this happening? I have to hurry and follow him. I need to have him forgive me. Oz. The lollipop. I have to follow the lollipop—Wait, no, no, Oz is the lollipop— No, the lollipop is Oz, and… That's not it. This isn't it!*

I have to follow Oz!

Gilbert gritted his teeth and bowed his head. He steeled himself.

His eyes darted up, and he sent a sharp glare at the man.

When he spoke, he could not have been more serious:

"I won't kneel, but I'll apologize one more time. —'Lollipop, I'm sorry.'"

That should do it. He started walking away,

quickly.

However, it apparently wasn't enough for the big man, and he wouldn't let him go quietly. With a roar like a raging bull, he bore down on Gilbert, swinging a thick, log-like arm at him. Gilbert had half expected things to turn out this way, and he dodged the arm easily.

The big man went badly off-balance.

Then:

"Use those coins to buy yourself a new one, all right?"

With that, Gilbert kicked the man's feet out from under him.

The big man had been moving fast, and he flew into the air, then landed on the cobbles on his back. The back of his head smashed into the broken candy, shattering it. He cried out in anguish, but Gilbert had already chased the big man from his mind and run off.

He looked for Oz, but…

It was too late. Oz and Alice had vanished from the street.

8

As he left Hodgepodge Street, traveling west, the townscape gradually changed.

There were fewer detached houses, and the streets became lined with plain, four- or five-story apartment buildings. There were no large streets, only a complicated web of narrow alleys that ran between the buildings.

Oz… Where are you?!

Gilbert ran, weaving through the alleys, searching for Oz and Alice. There wasn't much time left before sunset. Once that happened, night would come fast. It would be no time for Oz, a son of the House of Vessalius, to be out walking around without his valet.

The area was silent. Only Gilbert's footsteps echoed through it.

"……?!"

On turning a corner—he'd lost track of

how many corners that made—Gilbert stopped, startled.

A figure was curled up on the ground by the side of the road.

It was an old man, wrapped in dirty, ragged clothes. Gilbert made his footsteps loud as he approached, watching for a reaction, but the old man didn't move a muscle. For a moment, he wondered if it was a corpse, but as he got closer, he caught the smell of alcohol drifting from the old man.

…*Oh. A drunk, huh?*

Relieved, Gilbert knelt in front of the old man. Thinking even as he did so that it was probably a waste of time, he set his hands on the old man's shoulders and shook him roughly.

There was no immediate response, but as he kept calling "Hey!", heavy eyelids opened, and cloudy eyes turned Gilbert's way.

His lips worked, but he couldn't speak clearly, and Gilbert wasn't able to make out what he said.

Gilbert hadn't been expecting a decent conversation in the first place. Scowling at

the stench of liquor on the old man's breath, he put his face close to the man's ear and bellowed a question:

"Have you seen a kid?! Anywhere around here?!"

If there was no response, he intended to leave immediately. A second after he'd asked the question, Gilbert had already begun to stand up.

However:

"I saw."

A reply did come, in a hoarse, unsteady voice. Taken by surprise, Gilbert froze.

He grabbed the old man's arm, but just as he was about to hastily ask his next question —

"A blond brat in good clothes…got taken away by…'s lot."

That's Oz!

The situation could not have been worse.

Gilbert let go of the old man's arm, practically shoving him away, and took off like a shot.

The name the old man had spoken in that

hard-to-follow voice had belonged to a criminal organization that was notorious in Old Town.

The Gray Snake was a syndicate that conducted a variety of nefarious activities from its base of operations in the Bottom. Pandora was in charge of keeping the peace in Reveil, and from what Gilbert remembered, they were investigating the Gray Snake as well.

If he'd been taken away by a member of that organization…then Oz was in the Bottom, right now.

As he ran, Gilbert saw red. Alice should have been with Oz. What had she been doing? She was stupid and a glutton, but she should have at least done what it took to protect Oz. …Or had the two of them gotten separated?

Considering Alice's capriciousness, that seemed likely.

From what the old man had said, it had sounded as though only one person had been taken away.

"Dammit! Oz—!"

* * *

“With those duds, he’s gotta be nobility.”

“Yeah. A dumb one. Some aristocrat’s brat, messing around on his own in a place like that…”

“No kidding. What did the boss say we’re doing?”

“Fleecing his folks for as much as we can get. Must be rough, having a kid who’s a moron.”

“Well, thanks to that, we get rich. Better be grateful.”

“You said it. And? What’s the blond brat doing now?”

“The boss is trying to get his story out of him, but he’s having trouble. Apparently the kid’s clammed up.”

Crouching in the shadows, Gilbert muffled his breathing.

He was listening closely to the conversation that drifted to him from the building’s back door, just a few meters away. The speakers were two members of the Gray Snake syndicate. The “aristocrat’s brat” they’d mentioned was probably Oz.

From what they were saying, Gilbert gathered that Oz was still safe, and he felt very slightly relieved.

However, at the same time, he couldn't completely control his irritation at the many insulting things that were being said about his master.

He wanted to get right out there and hit them with a few choice words, but he clamped down the urge. Until he'd saved Oz, he had to move with the greatest possible care.

Oz is…with the boss, huh? …Maybe on the top floor?

Gilbert looked up at the building from where he hid beside it, behind an old fire cistern. He was currently behind the four-story tenement that the Gray Snake used as its headquarters.

He'd checked the front door first, but it had been tightly guarded by six syndicate members. The number wasn't a problem, but it would be hard to defeat them without letting them raise the alarm. All the first-floor windows had been shut firmly from the inside, and he'd decided that if he was going

to infiltrate, it would have to be through the back door.

There were two men standing at that back door.

If they'd only give him an opening, he could incapacitate them in an instant, even without using his gun.

The two members kept talking. The topic had shifted to predicting the cut they'd be given, and how they were going to use it.

A cheerful laugh went up. They seemed pretty relaxed and careless. Was it time to make his move? Gilbert was about to carefully peek out from his shelter, when…

Tunk.

As he began to change position, Gilbert's heel struck an empty liquor bottle that was lying on the ground.

Startled, Gilbert froze.

_____!

Hastily, he reached out for the empty bottle as it rolled away, but it was too late. The bottle struck the fire cistern with an unexpectedly loud noise. He sensed it when the syndicate members who were standing at

the back door flinched. Something cold ran down Gilbert's spine.

"Hey, did you hear something just now?"

"Yeah, over there… The fire cistern?"

Gilbert could hear the two members talking.

What do I do? What do I do? Just ignore it—I'm begging you! Gilbert was flustered.

Please ignore it, he prayed.

"I'll go check on it, just in case," one of the pair said.

There was the sound of approaching footsteps. The man who'd stayed at the back door spoke carelessly:

"I bet it's a cat. Just a cat. I hear there's more of 'em around here lately."

A cat. It was a snap decision. Gilbert tensed his throat, and:

"…Mroooowwwr."

He gave his very best cat impression. He hated cats. He'd never dreamed the day would come when he'd imitate one.

He'd performed the imitation on reflex,

and afterward, in spite of himself, he broke out in mild goose bumps.

However, it seemed to have worked: The approaching footsteps stopped, and he heard a voice say, “So it *was* just a cat.” For a moment, Gilbert felt relieved.

And then.

“I like cats. I’ve got three at home. C’mere, kitty-kitty. ♪”

Whaaaaaaat?!

Gilbert was aghast.

As the footsteps began coming closer again, there was no more time to think or hesitate. Knowing that the first one to strike would win, Gilbert leapt out from behind the fire cistern. He locked eyes with the approaching syndicate member. The man’s eyes went wide. His mouth moved as he prepared to yell.

Before he could make a sound—

“Sorry I’m not a cat!”

Gilbert brought the butt of his gun down on the other man’s head. There was a dull sound, and the man collapsed. As he did, Gilbert’s eyes were already on the back door.

He must have managed to catch them unawares; the man who'd stayed at the door was frozen, a startled look on his face. Gilbert couldn't let him alert the others inside. He sprinted to the back door in one burst. Just as the man yelled, "You—?!", he launched a kick into his solar plexus.

The man was knocked back against the wall, lost consciousness, and slumped to the ground.

Did they hear that…inside?!

He didn't know. He didn't know, but under the circumstances, it was now or never.

He approached the back door, turned the doorknob. It wasn't locked. He listened for sounds beyond the door, and when he was sure he couldn't hear anything, he flung it open.

On the other side, a dim hallway stretched away. It was silent.

From this point on, speed is what matters.

Gilbert tightened his fingers around the grip of his gun and raced down the corridor like a shadow.

Hang on, Oz!

* * *

THE TOP FLOOR OF THE GRAY SNAKE'S STRONGHOLD.

There had been many rooms on the other floors of the tenement that acted as their base of operations, but the top floor seemed to be just one large room.

Gilbert stood in front of a set of big double doors, the sort that looked like the entrance to a hall. He'd put all the syndicate members he'd encountered on his way here out of commission before they could raise the alarm. The men who'd been standing guard in front of the big doors were currently lying at Gilbert's feet, unconscious.

They had Oz on the other side. Even as his unease spurred him on, he put his ear to the door, telling himself to calm down.

He could hear faint voices in conversation.

"You think maybe this guy's mute? He just stares at you like a moron, no matter what you ask him."

The voice sounded irritated. Did it belong to the boss?

Apparently the captive Oz was responding to all questions with silence.

A hum of voices came to Gilbert through the door.

Apparently, the boss and Oz weren't the only ones on the other side. Ten people? … Probably not quite, but he guessed there were seven or eight syndicate members, besides the boss.

What do I do?

Should he charge in from the front? Should he come up with some kind of plan? Just as Gilbert was thinking this…

"Hey. Give me your knife."

The voice that seemed to belong to the boss spoke.

"I bet he'll talk if we cut off a finger. C'mon, hand it over!"

Wha…?!

Unless he did something, Oz was going to lose a finger.

Instantly, before he could think, he kicked the big doors open.

He leapt into the room. It was a vast

space. Inside, as Gilbert had expected, was a man who seemed to be the boss—holding a knife—and syndicate members with guns in their hands. There were eight of them.

The boss was standing surrounded by his men, with his back to Gilbert. As the big doors flew open with a bang, the men's startled faces all turned toward them.

However, Gilbert didn't have the leeway to care about the syndicate members; his eyes went directly to the boss's feet.

At those feet lay a pitiful-looking kid, trussed up with rope. He was facing away from Gilbert, who could see the back of his blond head.

Frantically, Gilbert called his name:

"O—"

The kid rolled over, turning to face him.

At that…

"……
Huh? Who're you?"

Gilbert was dumbfounded.

For a moment, he really had no idea who it was that lay there, but after a few seconds,

he understood.

The kid on the ground was the one who'd blown his nose on his coat, the commercial association president's only son.

It's…not…Oz?

In spite of himself, Gilbert looked as though he'd managed to misplace his soul.

"…What the… An intruder? Tch! What are the guys downstairs doing?!"

The boss spoke, irritated, turning toward Gilbert. With angry yells, the syndicate men leveled their guns at him.

However, Gilbert didn't even see the guns that were trained on him. He was desperately organizing his thoughts.

The captured kid hadn't been Oz.

Now that he thought about it, all the old man had said was "a blond brat in good clothes." He'd simply jumped to conclusions. He was disgusted with himself. So all that frantic running around had been wasted effort?

……*What am I doing?*

His shoulders slumped, and he gave a

long, tired sigh: “Haaaaaaaah.”

Gilbert had leapt into the room, then looked abruptly deflated. And the boss yelled, as though he thought Gilbert was making fun of him:

“Hey, joker! Do you understand the situation here?! I dunno whether you came to save the hostage or what, but you bust into the Gray Snake’s headquarters, you better believe you ain’t walking out in one piece! Get him, men!”

At the boss’s words, the syndicate men fired, one after another. However, none of them had spent much time at target practice. Most of the bullets missed, and Gilbert was able to dodge the ones that headed in his approximate direction by twisting slightly, so that they only skimmed his coat.

From the floor, the president’s son was staring up at him with round eyes.

What am I doing…? he thought again.

Gilbert’s anger and disgust at himself got muddled together, turning into an unfamiliar emotion that surged inside him. At that point, having exhausted their bullets, the syndicate members rushed him en masse,

yelling and cursing.

They were howling random things about syndicate traditions and pride, but…

In response, Gilbert thought:

Argh, for the love of…!

Inside his head, he heard something snap.

“You people are too damn confusing————————————!!”

He went berserk, as if taking everything out on them.

As he rampaged, a thought abruptly materialized in a corner of his mind:

Oz isn’t here… In that case…

Where was he?

9

Under a vermillion evening sky.

Gilbert had made his way back to Hodgepodge Street with the kid he'd ended up rescuing from the Gray Snake. The street was gearing up for its lively nighttime hours. It was beginning to show a different kind of bustle from the one he'd seen at noon.

"Kid…"

Gilbert set down the kid; he'd been carrying him under his arm. The kid looked up at him, blankly.

"I'm trying to find somebody."

The kid tilted his head in confusion, pointing at himself.

"No, not you. My master. So… Can you get home from here by yourself?"

The kid nodded.

"Don't ever go back that way again, you hear me?"

The kid nodded. *Does he really understand?* He wasn't at all confident about that, but it had been quite a while since he'd lost sight of Oz and Alice. He couldn't afford to take any more trouble over the kid. Possibly the kid had picked up on Gilbert's feelings; he spoke, softly:

"I won't. ……That was scary."

"It was, huh?"

Gilbert ruffled his hair, then let go, and the kid trotted off. *Go straight home*, Gilbert thought, then realized he didn't even know the kid's name.

He called after him:

"Kid, what's your name?"

The kid stopped in his tracks, turned back, and said, "Ojji." Then he immediately turned around again and disappeared from view.

His blond hair, like Oz's, bounced as he ran.

"…Even his name's sort of similar."

Gilbert's expression turned sour.

* * *

That's Oz!

As he walked rapidly down Hodgepodge Street, Gilbert spotted Oz coming toward him. Hastily, he ducked behind a nearby stack of wooden crates.

Cautiously, he peeked out from the shadow of the crates, looking the pair over. Alice was next to Oz. The two of them seemed to be walking along without saying much to each other. Every once in a while, Alice would speak to Oz, looking a little concerned.

Huh? Oz…?

Gilbert's eyes were playing tricks on him. For a moment, it had looked as though Oz was crying.

He wasn't actually crying, but his shoulders drooped, and he looked depressed.

Gilbert almost ran over to him on reflex, but he managed—barely—to restrain himself. *What happened?* He frowned.

When he looked closer, he saw that Oz held something in one hand.

It's a…box? A box of what?

The box Oz held was small enough to fit in one hand. He wondered if it was the reason

Oz had come to this neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Oz and Alice were getting nearer and nearer. If they kept coming this way, they'd pass right by the crates where Gilbert was hiding, and if that happened, they'd see him. He glanced around, searching for another place to hide.

Then, abruptly, the sound of their footsteps stopped. Gilbert looked back in their direction.

Oz and Alice were standing in front of a rubbish dump by the side of Hodgepodge Street. As Gilbert watched them, Oz tossed the small box he held into the dump. Then he spoke to Alice.

Since they were close, Gilbert heard their conversation.

"Let's go."

"Are you sure about this?"

"It's fine. …Let's go home, Alice."

With that, Oz began to run, heading away from the rubbish dump.

Hastily, Gilbert crouched down in the shadow of the crates. First Oz, then Alice, ran right past him.

Fortunately, neither of them seemed to have noticed Gilbert. He considered following Oz, but he was curious about the little box Oz had thrown away.

Oz had said they were going home. Alice was with him, so if they went straight home, he thought they'd probably be all right.

Just to be on the safe side, Gilbert looked back, making sure he couldn't see Oz and Alice. Then he walked over to the rubbish dump. There were all sorts of discarded cardboard boxes, paper bags, and cloth sacks. The little box Oz had thrown away had fallen on top of them.

The impact of being tossed had jolted the lid halfway off. When Gilbert bent closer to look, he saw its contents.

…A black…glove?

Gilbert picked up the box and took out what was inside.

It was a brand-new leather glove, all black.

Gilbert examined the glove closely, then tilted his head, curiously.

"There's just one…?" he murmured.

He glanced at the rubbish dump again.

The small box had held only one glove, the right one. He looked around the dump, but he didn't see the left glove.

Had Oz taken the remaining glove home with him? That wouldn't have been natural. He couldn't possibly have any use for an unmatched glove.

Gilbert gazed at the leather glove in his hand. It was black, and the size was too large for Oz's hands. Abruptly realizing something, Gilbert checked the inside of the box again.

The empty box still held a single card. Gilbert caught the edge with his fingertips and took the card out. It might have been a message card; it held a short note.

Just one sentence, written in a flowing hand:

To my dear friend…

Just then.

Tunk. Something was pressed against Gilbert's back.

?!

Startled, Gilbert froze. The object was

hard, and it felt like the end of a stick… Like the muzzle of a gun.

Gilbert hadn't been paying any attention at all to what was behind him, and now he regretted it. As he began to turn around on reflex, a voice just behind him said, "Don't move." The voice was muffled, as if the speaker had a cloth pressed to his mouth. Only one explanation came to mind.

"You really did a number on our organization a little while ago."

He got around behind me…?!

He didn't know what to do. His mind was flooded with anxiety. He should have seen this coming. He'd gone on a full-blown rampage, and it hadn't been likely the Gray Snake would just let him walk away.

"Put both hands out where I can see them."

The bloodlust in the voice was terribly sharp. Cold sweat beaded up on Gilbert's forehead.

The man seemed to be alone, but it was clear that he was far, far more skilled then the boss or the syndicate members back at

the Gray Snake's stronghold had been. He'd caught Gilbert off guard, but he still wasn't giving him any opportunities. For now, Gilbert would just have to obey the man and keep an eye out for openings.

When he followed the order obediently, the man behind his back spoke again:

"Kneel, then hang your head. Don't make any suspicious movements unless you want to get shot."

Rrgh! Gritting his teeth, Gilbert obeyed. The object that was probably a gun was still pressed firmly against his back.

"You're here for revenge? What are you going to do with m—"

"Now say 'woof.'"

"…Huh?"

"Bark like a dog. Do it."

The gun muzzle dug into his back sharply, as if the man had twisted it.

"Why do you want that?"

He asked because he really didn't understand, but the muzzle only dug into his back, spurring him on.

He didn't get it. He didn't, but he decided that, for now, he needed to follow the order, and that he could figure out later what his opponent was trying to do. The presence behind his back was overwhelming, and he couldn't even turn around.

"Wuh, woof…"

Internally disgusted—*First a cat, now a dog?*—he barked, his cheeks burning with shame.

The muzzle pressed to his back trembled slightly.

"Are you happy now…?!"

"……"

Why isn't he talking?! Gilbert thought. It didn't seem fair. At that, the voice spoke from behind him:

"Next, 'shake.' Pretend your master is in front of you."

"—Huh?"

"Go on, hurry up. Put your soul into it!"

"…… Hey, wait a second."

Something inside his mind was cooling

down rapidly. Gilbert's expression grew savage.

The voice behind his back continued; it was impossible to tell whether or not it had noticed.

"Once you've done that, then roll over. Lie on your back and pant with your tongue hanging out…"

"You little—!"

His face flushed bright red, and he whirled around violently. The person standing behind him, with the tip of his swordstick pressed against Gilbert's back, covering his mouth with his cloak, was—

"Break!!"

Without thinking, Gilbert hauled the other man up by his shirtfront.

Beaming, Break spoke: "My, you're so very *violent* all of a sudden, Gilbert-kun."

"Shove it. What were you trying to make me do?!"

When he'd gotten that far, something struck Gilbert as odd. "Hang on," he said, checking.

“Break, you said, ‘You really did a number on our organization’…”

He couldn’t have said that if he hadn’t known Gilbert had stormed the Gray Snake’s stronghold. As he spoke, Break wore a smug smile:

“The Gray Snake was rather luckless, wasn’t it? Who’d have thought they’d be annihilated by someone venting his frustration on them for no good reason?”

Dramatically, Gilbert understood.

Between the anger and the shame, he ended up raising his voice to a yell:

“Were you following me?!”

Poking the end of the swordstick right at Gilbert’s nose, Break said, “Certainly not.”

He continued:

“You may be a wimp, but you know this neighborhood. I wouldn’t follow you when you were coming here. Besides, you knew exactly what sort of place the Bottom was. Who’d ever have thought you’d leap into ‘absolutely unnecessary trouble!’ of your own accord…”

Break heaved an affected-sounding sigh.

Gilbert felt as if he'd been made fun of in a big way, but he asked a question that concerned him even more:

"Then you were trailing Oz, too?"

"That's right."

"Why?! How long were you watching? Or, no… How much do you know?!"

As Gilbert interrogated him, incensed, Break said, "I wonder," and gave a significant smile.

"Well, I knew you were shadowing Oz-kun to keep an eye on him, and because you are, in fact, a good-for-nothing, I'd made allowances for the fact that you'd lose him. Even if Alice-kun was with him, when a son of the House of Vessalius goes to a neighborhood like this one without even his valet, he can't be left alone. I circled around ahead of them and cleared the way a bit."

"Cleared the way?"

"To the rougher set, Oz-kun wandering around this area without his valet might as well be ambulatory bait-on-legs. I ran off small-time thugs who tried to bother him."

Then he added, "Well, and I'm not entirely

uninvolved in this affair, either." *What's that supposed to mean?* Gilbert was about to grill him, but before he could, Break continued:

"However, I was occupied with you and took my eyes off him for a moment, and I'm afraid the results were unfortunate."

As he spoke, he lightly tapped Gilbert's hand—the one that was holding the leather glove—with his swordstick.

Gilbert let his eyes fall to the glove again.

Then he looked up, startled, and glared at Break.

"Do you know? What this is about, I mean?"

"Yes, well. More or less."

His expression asked, *Would you like to hear?*

When Gilbert said, "Tell me," with zero hesitation, Break seemed to think just a little. Then he began to speak:

"Since things did end this way, it's probably best if you know, too. Only… You didn't hear it from me, you understand."

Gilbert nodded.

“I expect it won’t stay a secret, in any case.” Break smiled, and then he spoke:

“That was a present for you from Oz-kun. …Or it was intended to be, at any rate.”

10

When you turn the last page, the story ends.

However, that isn't to say that the lives of the characters in the book are over. Even after their tale ends, the characters continue to live through days the reader knows nothing about.

Oz thought of the ending of *Fruit of Uncertainty*.

The story had ended with Ivel, the detective, hugging his friend's corpse to his chest and howling.

On his friend's hands were the black leather gloves Ivel had given him when they were young.

I wonder what Ivel did with the black gloves after that…

It was the morning of the day after he'd gone to Old Town.

In his room at Pandora Headquarters, Oz

sat in a chair by the table in the center of the room. It was still early morning. Ordinarily, he'd be sleeping peacefully right about now.

He'd had trouble getting to sleep the previous night, and even so, his eyes had opened very early.

Oz's vague, faintly melancholy gaze was turned toward the ceiling.

Fruit of Uncertainty, which he hadn't yet returned to Elliot, lay on the table.

After he'd finished reading it the first time, he'd read it through again several more times.

However, no matter how many times he reread it, there was no way for him to know what happened after the last page. To find that out, he'd have to ask the author. However, the book had been written roughly a century ago. The author was long dead.

The fate of the black gloves.

"…Haaah."

No matter what he did, it reminded him of the day before, and Oz couldn't keep from sighing.

The little box and the black glove. He'd

thrown them away at the rubbish dump.

…Well…

There was no help for it. That was all I could do.

But.

After I'd bought them and everything… After I even had Break help…

The events of the previous day rose vividly in his mind's eye.

* * *

They'd searched Hodgepodge Street for the black leather gloves, but hadn't found them.

When, following the advice they'd been given, Oz and Alice left the street and walked west, they reached an alley where several stalls rubbed elbows with one another. Confused jumbles of articles were laid out on cloths spread right on the pavement. As they walked over, bold, steady stares followed them.

Most of the shops on Hodgepodge Street had welcomed them, but the atmosphere here was very different. It might have been because this was close to "the Bottom."

Alice seemed to have picked up on the danger in the air; she gave a belligerent snort.

He couldn't imagine finding anything here good enough to give to Gilbert. Still, he couldn't just give up without looking, and Oz made up his mind to check each of the stalls. For starters, he crouched down in front of the nearest stall.

Ill-mannered eyes turned on him, staring openly, as if probing his intentions.

Pretending not to notice, Oz spoke cheerfully:

"Mister, there's something I'm trying to find."

"…Find it yourself."

It was an answer you'd never expect to hear in customer service. "What's with you, you jerk?! Are you even trying?!" Alice fumed, but Oz calmed her down. "All right," he told the stall owner, and he began examining the haphazard array of items.

Ninety percent of it was junk that seemed to be little more than garbage. After he'd looked things over, Oz said, "Thank you,"

stood up, and left the stall. *Tch!* The clear sound of someone clicking his tongue followed him. Oz just smiled wryly.

He moved on to the next stall. That stallkeeper's service was about the same. As before, Oz checked through the articles on his own, but as expected, he found nothing.

The next stall, and the next one, and the stall after that were all the same. He felt a growing sense of futility. Time passed in vain.

The next stall was the last one. If he didn't find it here, he'd just have to give up for the day.

However, the stall seemed far too dreary a place to pin his last hopes on. The other stalls had had lots of articles set out, even if most of them had been junk. In contrast, the items lined up at this stall could have been counted on one hand.

The stallkeeper was a timid-looking young man. Oz could tell at a glance that he wouldn't find what he wanted here, but the young man watched him with imploring eyes, and he decided to at least take a look.

"Please buy something. Anything! If you

don’t, I won’t get any supper tonight.” The young man urged him on, pleading.

Maybe not, but… Inwardly, Oz was troubled. Everything here was rubbish. Even if he bought something and took it home, he’d just have to throw it away.

Then, next to him, Alice presumptuously put out a hand. The item she’d picked up from the stall was a small, worn-out wooden box.

It was very plain, and small enough to fit on the palm of her hand.

The young man must have seen a sales opportunity. He spoke desperately:

“I think it’s a box for accessories or something, but it might be broken; it won’t open. Oh, but it’s a valuable masterpiece that a certain aristocrat had a famous artist make for him, and it’s rare to see gems like this, and I highly recommend it. Even though it’s broken.”

When someone recommended a shabby item like that to you, there was really nothing to say.

Alice had picked it up on a whim, without

much interest, but being told it wouldn't open seemed to make her want to open it: She began wrestling with the box. She planted her fingers on its edges, and she even began cursing at it, trying to pry it open one way or another.

"Alice, don't. If it breaks, we'll have to buy __"

Just as Oz cautioned her, beside himself with anxiety…

There was a *crack*, and the lid of the wooden box opened… Or rather, "split." In the instant it happened, Oz clearly heard the young stallkeeper give an ecstatic "Yesss!" Oz's shoulders slumped. Alice spoke to him, sounding satisfied:

"Did you see that, Oz? I got it open."

"…People don't call that 'opened,' Alice."

His wallet held his precious "own money," but there was really nothing to be done about it. Oz began to get his wallet out.

He'd pay for it, but there was no point in taking it home, so he thought he'd have the stallkeeper get rid of it for him. *I wonder how much it's going to cost. What if he takes*

advantage of the fact that we didn't ask the price first, to gouge us? As he was thinking these things, Alice spoke again:

"Hmm? There's something in here."

"……Huh?"

Oz's head came up. He looked at the small box.

It might really have been a gift from heaven.

Oz leapt at Alice, catching the hand that held the box.

"Alice, the box! Let me see it!"

What Alice was about to take out of the little wooden box with the broken lid was…

A pair of black leather gloves.

* * *

Looking back now, Oz thought he'd been almost drunk on happiness then.

He'd been persistent in his search, and as a result, at the very, very end, he'd found what he'd been looking for. Not only that, but the line written on the message card that had been in the box was ideal for the sort of present Oz had been thinking of. He'd

thought he'd finally found the perfect gift.

He'd been deliriously happy.

But.

He didn't want to remember what had come after that.

"Ahhh…"

Curled up on a chair in his room, hugging his knees, Oz gave a dismal groan.

Even though he didn't want to remember, what had happened afterward was burned into his memory, and it replayed in his mind whether he wanted it to or not.

Over and over.

I wonder what Gil's face will look like when he gets these.

Back then, luckily, they'd escaped without being charged an exorbitant price, and he'd managed to pay with the remaining money in his wallet.

He'd put the box in his pocket, carrying the black leather gloves in his hand as if he was showing them off to everyone, and they'd returned to Hodgepodge Street. At that point, all they had to do was go home,

but he'd wanted to thank the young man at the sweets shop who'd told them about that place.

Yes, Oz thought. Back then, he'd been in terribly high spirits.

So much so that he hadn't seen his surroundings.

He'd had no warning. No, to be fair, Oz should have heard the approaching clatter.

He'd been giddy and hadn't noticed *it* until it was nearly on top of him.

A horse-drawn carriage barreled out of one of the alleys that opened onto Hodgepodge Street, moving at a ferocious speed.

He was standing right in its path. If Alice hadn't yanked him by the arm, right then, Oz would have been pulled under the wheels of the carriage. If that had happened, his body would have been what got torn to shreds.

…Instead of the left-hand black leather glove.

When Alice hauled on his arm, and he noticed the looming carriage…

He'd been startled. His grip had relaxed,

and it had been sucked into the spinning wheels, disappearing in an instant in the roiling clouds of dust. The carriage passed them like a fierce gust of wind, without slowing, and careered off down the street. The sudden, unpredictable violence of the act drew screams from the crowd.

It was sheer good fortune that no one had been seriously injured.

"You idiot! What were you spacing out for?!"

Even as Alice yelled at him, Oz stood there, dazed. He didn't understand what had happened. When his mind caught up with reality, the first thing he did was check on the leather gloves he'd been holding.

The only glove in his hand was the right-hand one.

"Where's the left one?"

As he murmured, Oz looked around him. His eyes went to the road down which the carriage had bolted. Several tattered fragments that looked like shreds of black cloth were scattered across it. He didn't understand what they were right away.

Although it felt as if he was denying what

his head knew to be true, finally, Oz understood.

He was looking at the black leather glove.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah…”

Curling up even smaller on his chair, Oz heaved an even longer sigh than before. Whose fault had it been? The reckless carriage’s? No, that wasn’t it. It had clearly been his own fault, for being in such high spirits and not paying attention to his surroundings.

The tragic scene replayed in his mind. Absentmindedly, in memory, Oz traced that reckless carriage. Something about it tugged at him.

I wonder what that carriage was, anyway…

It hadn’t been a cart.

The carriage had been decorated, and it had looked first-rate. It had been the sort of carriage aristocrats rode in. Why had a carriage like that been barreling down Hodgepodge Street? That in itself was strange, and yet…

No, that doesn’t matter. More important—

The right-hand glove, the one he’d tossed

on the rubbish dump. The one he'd thrown away with his own two hands.

"Are you sure about this?" Alice had asked.

"It's fine," he'd answered.

Oz looked up at the ceiling of his room. His expression was dull.

Ahhh… After I'd bought them and everything… After I even had Break help…

His face wore the look of someone who was remembering something.

Wrapped in an endlessly listless aura, Oz murmured, as if he were sinking into the depths:

"With the money I earned all by myself, at my very first job…"

The words had come out sounding like a complaint, and they were unexpectedly loud in the quiet room. Startled, Oz fell silent.

Cautiously, his gaze went to the bed.

Alice was in it, asleep; she'd pulled the comforter up over her head, so that only the ends of her hair hung outside. She'd come in just as Oz got up and had taken over the bed. This happened frequently, so Oz had let her

do as she pleased.

“She didn’t…hear…about the job, did she…”

Having Alice find out about it wouldn’t be a problem in itself, but she was straightforward, and if he told her, there was no telling when the news might make its way to Gilbert.

All he could hear from the Alice-lump under the comforter was soft, sleeping breathing.

Oz gave a sigh of relief.

When keeping secrets, it was important to keep the number of people who knew as small as possible.

“Although I guess there’s no point in keeping it a secret now.”

After all, it was already dead and gone.

His present to Gilbert. The one he’d bought with his first, very own money.

“‘Just one glove.’ Yeah, right…”

As Oz murmured to himself in self-mockery, there was a light knock at the door, and it opened, revealing Gilbert. Apparently

he hadn't expected Oz to be awake; he spoke softly, sounding startled: "…Oz?"

Gilbert was balancing a tray with a tea set on his right hand.

At the sight of that hand, Oz doubted his own eyes.

"Huh? Gil—"

On one hand—just the right one, the one supporting the tray—Gilbert wore a glove. A black leather glove.

* * *

"I'm sorry, Oz. If I'd known you were awake, I would've waited for you to respond to the knock."

Gilbert apologized, crossed to the table, and set down the tray.

Working briskly, he began to make tea.

However, Oz had other things on his mind. His eyes were riveted on Gilbert's right hand.

Puzzled by the way Oz was acting, Gilbert cocked his head.

"What is it, Oz?"

“No, that’s my line! What’s going on…?”

Oz had been frozen, still hugging his knees; now he released his legs and clambered down to the floor with a clatter, nearly falling. He pointed a finger at Gilbert, as if demanding an explanation. Then he pointed at the right hand in its black leather glove, unable to get the words out properly:

“Gil— That! The glove! Why…?”

“Oh, this?”

Gilbert had been making tea, but at Oz’s words, he paused, glanced at his right hand, and smiled.

From his expression, it was obvious that he really, truly cherished it.

Then—to Oz, of all people—he spoke with evident pride:

“Isn’t it great?”

“No— That’s not what I meant! Listen—”

Oz was trying to cross-examine him, but the words wouldn’t come.

Gilbert reached into his breast pocket with his gloved right hand, drew a card out with his fingertips, and gazed at it. Oz could see

the letters written on it:

To my dear friend.

Then Gilbert spoke:

“It’s my treasure. I’ll cherish it as long as I live.”

He spoke decisively, clearly, strongly.

“_____!!”

Oz was speechless.

Questions were all that swirled in his head: *Why? How?*

The glove on Gilbert’s right hand was, without a doubt, the black leather glove Oz had bought and thrown away the day before. And, in that hand, he was holding the message card. The present for Gilbert that Oz had planned in secret.

Why did Gilbert have a present he’d thrown into the rubbish dump? The only ones who’d known about the secret plan were Break and Alice; was one of them responsible for this? No, finding the culprit didn’t matter anymore.

More important, Oz couldn’t understand it.

Why was Gilbert happily wearing an incomplete pair of gloves, a set of just one?

How could he be happy about something like that?

“I’ll cherish it as long as I live,” he says—

How could he say that?

…And what should he say to Gilbert? Beyond confused, Oz spoke crossly:

“……J-just one glove? That’s weird.”

“Really? I don’t think it’s particularly weird.”

“It’s weird! It’s dumb! One single glove isn’t good for anything! Take it off!”

At Oz’s yell, Gilbert gave a small grunt, then nodded deeply.

He answered with a straight face:

“You’re right. It would be terrible if I scratched it or got it dirty. I’ll put it away somewhere safe— *Koff?!*”

Oz’s flying kick had struck Gilbert in the gut.

He’d shown no mercy.

As he held his stomach, his eyes tearing

up, Gilbert looked back at Oz; several question marks floated above his head.

Then a fist flew his way. Hastily, Gilbert dodged it.

“Oz, wait! Calm down. What’s wrong?!”

Gilbert stretched out both hands, checking him.

However, Oz struck the words down with a “—Shut up!”, sulking crossly, and threw another punch. Naturally, Gilbert did nothing but defend. He was fighting his master, which meant he couldn’t restrain his opponent by force, so he just kept dodging.

Without warning, a game of tag had broken out in the bedroom.

“Why are you dodging, Gil?!”

“B-because it’ll hurt if I get hit, obviously!”

“Stop it! Don’t dodge the next one!”

“That’s crazy! At least tell me why!”

“No!!”

With no hesitation, Oz answered Gilbert’s plea with a declaration.

The shock brought Gilbert to a standstill, and Oz’s fist hit its target.

Gilbert fled, and Oz gave chase. Alice had been sleeping in the bed, but at the noise, she sat up. Dazedly, she watched the two of them race around; her eyes still looked half-asleep. Then, slowly, she opened her mouth and spoke to them:

“What are you two doing? That looks like fun. Let me play.”

““We’re not playing!””

The two stopped in their tracks, answering

Alice in perfect unison. “Hmm?” As Alice gave a short grunt, the game of tag started up again, right in front of her. Alice watched them, but soon flopped back down onto the bed.

As she drifted back into sleep, hugging the pillow, Alice murmured:

“Oz, your face… I can’t tell whether you’re mad or smiling…”

* * *

MEANWHILE, RIGHT AROUND THAT SAME MOMENT.

Sharon and Break were enjoying their morning tea on a terrace a short distance from Oz’s room. There were fresh-baked scones from Pandora’s kitchen on the table. The two were quietly drinking their tea, without saying much.

Looking up at the clear sky, Break murmured:

“It’s so peaceful, my lady.”

“It certainly is.”

Lowering her teacup from her lips, Sharon spoke with a pleasant sigh. She was smiling.

The two of them returned to quietly savoring their tea.

They were nearly silent. It was as if they were listening closely to something. And very much enjoying it.

Sharon murmured softly:

“It sounds as though they’re simply playing.”

Oz’s and Gilbert’s noisy voices drifted from a room somewhere.

The voices were drawn up into the sky, and they seemed to herald the start of a lively day.

No one who heard them could help but chuckle.

~ Fin ~

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

In order to preserve the original reading experience of this manga section, the following pages have been reproduced in their original right-to-left reading order.

For the best reading experience, please click or tap here to skip to the beginning, then page backward through the manga.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

WAAARGH, BE OKAY, OOOOOZ!
WHAT A NUI-SANCE.
WHAT A NUI-SANCE ...
OH, WHAT A NUISANCE.
IT WAS SUCH A CHORE.
...AND THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED.
...HE'S AWFULLY GOOD AT LOOKING AFTER PEOPLE.
...
PUFUUU (HUFF)
GOOD GRIEF.
THOSE PEOPLE ARE SEEERIOUS NUISANCES.

I'M GOING SHOPPING IN REVEIL WITH ALICE TOMORROW.
I CAN'T WAIT!!
KYAH!
IT'S KINDA HEAVY!! MONEY IS HEAVY!!! WOW!! THIS IS SO COOL!!
BREAK! BREAK, THIS IS FANTASTIC! LOOK, I EARNED THIS! I EARNED IT MYSELF!!
KYAH!
LATER ...
HUH? GIL??
HE'S STAYING HOME!
...
SINCE I AM RATHER INVOLVED ...
...I'LL HAVE TO MAKE SURE HE'S SAFE.
AN IRREPRESSIBLE AURA THAT SCREAMS "PAMPERED RICH KID"
IF A BOY AS BEAUTIFUL AS THAT ONE GOES SWAGGERING AROUND OLD TOWN, HE'LL STICK OUT LIKE A SORE THUMB. (SARCASM)
...AND I SUPPOSE HE ISN'T AWARE OF THAT.
HIS CLOTHES ARE CASUAL, BUT THE CLOTH IS VERY GOOD. (OZ DOESN'T KNOW THIS.)
E-YAAAH!
GILBERT-KUN WILL FOLLOW HIM, EVEN IF TOLD NOT TO, BUT...
...HE'LL LOSE OZ RIGHT AWAY ANYWAY.

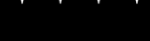
A SIDE EPISODE OF ADORATION 2
ONE DAY, QUITE SUDDENLY, OZ-KUN SAID—
SAY, BREAK? COULD YOU SET ME UP WITH A GOOD JOB?
IN OTHER WORDS, I SUPPOSE HE WANTS TO BUY GILBERT A PRESENT WITH MONEY HE EARNED.
.....
WHAT A NUI-SANCE.
WHAT ABOUT A SALON RUN BY MY ACQUAINTANCE, THEN?
A SALON!! THAT SOUNDS SOPHISTI-CATED...!!
HE TOLD ME... ...HE HAD SOMETHING HE WANTED TO BUY "WITH HIS OWN MONEY."
THEN WHY DON'T I EMPLOY YOU? YOU'LL DO EVERYTHING I SAY, ALL DAY!!
NO WAY.
IT WAS A SECRET FROM GILBERT-KUN.
THE IDEAL JOB WOULD LET HIM EARN NICELY IN VERY LITTLE TIME.

A SIDE EPISODE OF ADORATION 1
THIS BOOK YOU LOANED ME!
IT WAS REALLY, REALLY, REALLY GOOD!!
HELLO, OZ-KUN
PATA (PATTER)
PATA
ELLIOT!
THE WAY THE CHARACTERS ALL HAD FIRM CONVICTIONS! THAT WAS SO COOL!
HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH
はゎゎゎ
YEAH!! THAT LAST SCENE WITH THE DETECTIVE AND THE MURDERER WAS INCREDIBLE! OF COURSE MY VERY FAVORITE WAS—
!
I KNOW, RIGHT!?
ARROND!
IVEL!
AT IT AGAIN, YOU TWO?
HOW CAN YOU NOT BE TIRED OF THAT?
GYAAAGH
ギャーース
POKA (BAP)
ポカ
GYAAAGH (SHRIEK)
ギャーース
JL
ポカ
POKA
KIII (SCREECH)
キィィン
JL

The Story
of
a Relationship

AN ORDINARY DATE

Time in the Sun



1

NOON ON A CLOUDLESS DAY.

Having left the Nightray manor, Vincent Nightray reached the designated meeting place right at the promised time.

He was just outside the main gate of a memorial park located near one of the secondary Vessalius residences.

The gate was flanked by benches, one on each side, and one of the benches held a girl. The girl, who was wearing a lovely dress, was the person Vincent had promised to meet: Ada Vessalius. On seeing Vincent, Ada rose from the bench with a bright smile.

“Vincent-sama.”

Calling his name in a voice that was filled with delight, she hurried over to him.

When she reached Vincent, Ada nodded to

him quietly, watching him with straightforward eyes. Her gaze was friendly, and almost dazzlingly innocent.

“It’s been a long time, Vincent-sama.”

In response, Vincent returned her smile smoothly.

“It certainly has, Ada-sama… I’m sorry; my schedule hasn’t allowed me to make time for us to meet.”

“No, I know you’re busy.”

Ada shook her head, shyly telling him not to worry about it.

Vincent spoke, sounding concerned:

“I made sure to arrive on time, but… Have I kept you waiting?”

“Oh! No…”

At his words, Ada blushed, embarrassed. She looked down a little, clasping her hands in front of her, fidgeting with her fingers. “When I thought of being able to see you, I woke earlier than expected,” she answered in a small voice.

“You were looking forward to seeing me, then. I’m glad… to think we felt the same

way.”

Vincent turned a gentle gaze on Ada.

…While, privately, he thought the complete opposite:

This really isn’t the time for me to be playing with a sow like you.

Ada Vessalius was a daughter of the House of Vessalius, one of the four great dukedoms.

The House of Nightray was another great dukedom, and when Vincent of the House of Nightray kept company with Ada, it certainly wasn’t out of genuine affection.

It was pure self-interest.

The head of the House of Vessalius, Oscar Vessalius, was very fond of Ada. Vincent planned to wrap her ’round his little finger so that, someday, he could use her as a trump card against Oscar.

Obviously.

If not, he wouldn’t have wanted to spend a single hour with Ada, an innocent who seemed made up entirely of idealistic sentiments. On the contrary, Vincent actively loathed the “light” that hung around her.

How exasperating. On top of my other problem—

Quietly, so that Ada wouldn't notice, Vincent gave an irritated sigh.

The "other problem" was a matter involving a certain aristocrat.

The House of Nightray had always been the subject of many questionable, whispered rumors, and there were a number of aristocrats who could be called their political enemies. Generally speaking, they fell into two categories.

Aristocrats in one category weren't pleased that the House of Nightray was ranked among the honorable four great dukedoms. Aristocrats in the other felt that the House of Nightray would be easy to depose, and had fallen captive to their own ambitions. The Basil family was one of the latter, and lately, they'd been actively sniffing about the House of Nightray.

The simple fact that the family's internal affairs were being investigated didn't bother Vincent in the least.

However, if they should happen to get close to the "plan" he was covertly

promoting and had kept secret even from the Nightray family, there would be trouble.

The Basil family's movements had been reported a short while ago.

Naturally, Vincent had taken immediate action.

However, although—or possibly because—the Basils were only minor nobility, they were skilled at acting craftily, and so far he hadn't been able to trip them up.

I want to crush these unsightly flies quickly and put an end to it.

"—to me, Vincent-sama?"

Although it hadn't been for long, Vincent had been musing, and he'd missed what Ada had said.

The words had been in the form of a question. "Hmm…?" Vincent muttered, glancing at her.

Ada seemed to assume that Vincent's reaction meant she hadn't managed to explain properly. "Um," she faltered, as if trying to find a different way to phrase her words.

"I meant, could you leave the choice…of

where we go today to me?”

Caught mildly by surprise, Vincent’s eyes widened slightly.

“To you, Ada-sama…?”

“Yes. Only if you wouldn’t mind, of course…”

“……”

Vincent was silent. Suspicion and misgivings welled up inside him. What nonsense was this woman suggesting?

“‘Mind’ isn’t really the word. Where did this come from…?”

At the question, Ada blushed and looked down.

“—I just, um, a little while ago, when I was talking with some friends at Lutwidge Academy, the subject came up.”

“The subject…?” Vincent echoed.

“Yes.” Ada nodded earnestly.

“We thought it might be rather nice if ladies were proactive, if we sometimes took the lead and entertained the gentlemen instead. You’re always so kind to me, Vincent-sama, and so today, as thanks, I

thought…”

Why can’t they mind their own business? What a thundering nuisance.

Vincent couldn’t help but think these things.

“W-would that be all right?”

Ada raised her head, clenching both hands into fists, looking at him as if she was fully prepared to die.

Icy disgust and contempt welled up inside Vincent. *How can these women-creatures get so desperate over a mere date?* he thought.

Today, as on other days, Vincent had planned on taking a casual stroll somewhere nearby and then parting.

He also knew that Ada wouldn’t harbor ill feelings toward him if he refused her proposal, and yet…

Vincent gave an absolutely flawless smile.

“Thank you, Ada-sama… If you would, then. I leave the day in your hands.”

If I spend today with her, it should be all right to ignore her for a while.

…He calculated, silently.

2

“Where are you taking me first, Ada-sama…?”

Vincent asked his question as they began to walk away from the memorial park. He glanced at Ada, who was walking beside him.

Ada nodded.

“The museum. They’re holding an exhibition of Greggs paintings just now.”

“Greggs…?”

“You’d said you liked him earlier, Vincent-sama, so…”

What is she talking about? Vincent thought.

He was familiar with the names of a passable number of artists, but this was the first time he’d heard the name Greggs.

How could he like or hate an artist he’d never heard of?

Did she misinterpret something? he

wondered, but after a little thought, one thing came to mind.

It sometimes happened when he and Ada were walking in town.

They'd be on a date, but Vincent's attention would drift from her, and he'd be thinking about something else. Once in a while, Ada would follow Vincent's gaze and ask, "…Do you like that?"

At times like these, Vincent invariably answered, "Yes."

He'd be simply going along with Ada's conversation, and the reply would be completely insincere.

He didn't remember any of the things he'd been looking at when she'd asked him that. However, this must mean that Ada had carefully, conscientiously shut them away in the drawers of her memory.

Vincent smiled, apparently quite happy.

"You remembered, Ada-sama… I'm glad."

Every single stupid little thing… It makes me want to vomit.

Conversations that were meaningless and worthless to Vincent. Trivial incidents that

happened when they were together.

Ada cherished each one of these things as her treasures, and the imbecility of it irritated him. *"Leave the choice of where we go today to me"? I knew I should have turned down that moronic proposal of hers*, he thought. He seriously considered telling her he'd begun to feel ill, cutting things short and going home.

Meanwhile, since Vincent had thanked her, Ada had looked down in a fit of self-consciousness.

Then, after they'd walked down the avenue for a short while…

Beside Vincent, Ada abruptly gave a small cry: "…Oh!"

With the expression of a starry-eyed young girl, she pointed ahead of them.

"I see it, Vincent-sama. ♪ That's it, that building."

"It is, hmm…? It was closer than I expected."

Copying Ada, Vincent also looked up ahead. When he glanced at the old-fashioned yet magnificent museum, he noticed the sign

that adorned its front. Then, as Vincent saw the letters that were written grandly on that sign…

"?!?!?!"

Avant-garde Artist

Greggs Gilmore

First Solo Exhibition

All of that was fine. The problem was what came next. The name of the exhibition.

Banquet of Black Magic

His whole body spasmed. He thought he might have a spontaneous nosebleed.

"Banquet…of Black Magic"?!

Black magic.

Black magic.

Black magic. That was…

That's—!!

With terrific force, Vincent turned to face Ada.

In spite of himself, the look in his eyes could have belonged to a wild animal, but Ada was still gazing at the museum, and she didn't notice his expression.

She was so happy she was practically skipping.

“You’d said you weren’t interested in this genre, Vincent-sama, so I was surprised. ♪ Greggs always uses a magic motif in his works, and he’s raised his art to a level no one else can follow. He’s truly wonderful! My very favorite is his masterpiece *Summoning of the Demon King*, and today will be the first time I’ve ever seen the real thing—”

The phrase “in seventh heaven” might have been invented to describe Ada as she was now.

Black magic, and the occult in general.

These were what Ada liked.

They were also the cause of the massive trauma Vincent had suffered earlier when he’d told Ada, *“I want you to show me your true self,”* and had been taken to her room.

To think she’d bring him to an exhibition of paintings of those things…

—Don’t tell me the woman tricked me…?!

He guessed, in a whirlpool of confusion and agitation.

Was this a scheme to use the fact that he

didn't really remember their conversations against him, taking him to a place *she* wanted to go?

"??? Vincent-sama?"

It was possible that she'd felt his intense gaze. Ada turned to him, looking blank.

Instantly, Vincent erased the sharpness from his expression, smiling mildly back at her.

The corners of his lips were tense and twitching, but it wasn't so bad that she'd notice.

Ada started, then looked guilty.

"Oh! I-I'm sorry. I got carried away all by myself—"

As he watched the shamefaced, apologizing girl, Vincent gave a furtive sigh.

If she were the type who schemed and tried to trick people, I suppose this would be easier…

However, that wasn't the case. She was honest, purely and simply herself.

And, precisely because this was true, Ada Vessalius was sometimes a very difficult person for Vincent to deal with.

Ada watched him, timidly.

“Um… Could it be that you really…don’t like these things, after all?”

Her expression seemed uneasy, as if she was afraid she’d made another mistake.

“Of course I don’t.

“Black magic, the occult… How many times do I have to tell you not to drag me into your vulgar little hobbies?

“Despair in the face of your folly and plunge into hell, sow.”

It would be so very exhilarating to hit her with those.

…However, it would mean throwing away all the time and effort he’d spent so that he could use her.

Vincent faked a kind expression.

“Well, not…to the extent that you do. I do appreciate them purely as art.”

He spit out words he didn’t feel at all.

As Ada heard these words, the unease immediately vanished from her expression, and her face shone with relief and delight.

Inwardly—*Tch!*—Vincent clicked his tongue.

In his mind, he cursed at her.

Simple imbecile of a woman. She really does irritate me…

Then the two of them entered the museum.

“Eeeeeek! ♪♪♪ *Summoning of the Demon King* is right here to welcome us! ♪♪♪”

“……!” Vincent took a mental hit.

“Oh! This is the great work *Corpse Embraced by Death and Destruction*! How perfectly splendid! ♪♪♪”

“……!!”

“Eeeeek! ♪♪♪ This one is *Maiden with Grimoire*, and this one is *Black Procession*. ♪♪♪”

“……! ……!! ……!”

“There are accursed masterpieces over there, too, and there! ♪♪♪ I-I-I’m so happyyyyyy! ♪♪♪”

“……”

The hour that they spent touring the museum wore away much of Vincent’s

mental stamina.

3

“A-are you all right, Vincent-sama? You look rather pale…”

Ada’s question came when they left the museum, as if she’d returned to her senses.

Vincent’s face was ashen, and his cheeks seemed somehow hollow. However, he responded to Ada’s concern instantly:

“No, I enjoyed myself. Heh-heh, now then, where will you take me next…?”

He wore a very clear, crisp smile.

And, after he’d spoken, with the smile still on his face, he regretted it enormously.

Ada looked relieved. “In that case, next—” She took out a folded memo, opened it with her fingertips, and scanned it eagerly.

Vincent glanced at the contents of the note, and was promptly bored stiff.

The memo held the day’s program. It was densely written, over several lines, in a soft,

feminine hand.

Apparently Ada hadn't thought up the agenda all by herself; the note also held scribbled messages of support, most likely from her friends. "I hope it's a day straight from your dreams." "Isn't love wonderful?!" "We're cheering for you, Ada-sama. ♪" And so on, and so on.

…*I'll pretend I didn't see that*, Vincent decided.

Soon, after reading over the memo several times, Ada nodded.

"L-let's go, Vincent-sama."

She set off, firmly. In a faintly wary voice, Vincent asked:

"Where are we're going…?"

"Um, well, it isn't far. It's very close."

Possibly because she was embarrassed, Ada was evasive, and Vincent grew even warier.

They walked along the street in front of the museum, and soon came out onto a wide avenue lined with all sorts of shops.

Stylish restaurants, jewelers, and clothing

and accessories stores that supplied the aristocracy stood shoulder to shoulder on either side of the redbrick road.

Vincent didn't like crowded places, and he grimaced slightly.

Out on the avenue, Ada looked around the area, finding what she was searching for almost immediately. "There it is," she said cheerfully. She took the lead and began walking. As Vincent followed Ada, he glanced at her destination, and the frown lines in his forehead deepened.

……*You must be joking.*

Ada was headed for a small shop.

It was an adorable little place, and its walls and roof had been painted in bright colors. It was obviously the sort of shop young women would like, and its sign held the words:

Matthew's Apple Pies ~ Baking the Sweet-and-Sour Taste of Love ♪~

In a moment, Vincent's face turned sullen, as if he'd gotten heartburn.

"—Vincent-sama?"

Ada turned around.

Instantly, Vincent put on a gentlemanly smile.

“Apple pie, is it…?”

“Yes, a friend recommended it—Um, I…”

“That’s nice.” Vincent smiled back, but inwardly, he didn’t think it was the least bit “nice.”

It doesn’t matter, he thought. *Let’s just get through the plan.*

Approaching the shop’s counter, Ada ordered a variety that had custard in it and seemed even sweeter than the others. The shop clerk wrapped thin slices of the apple pie in stylish paper, then gave them to Ada. Apparently you were supposed to eat it just like that, without using forks.

There was a bench in front of the shop, and the two of them sat down on it, side by side.

“Here you are.” Politely, Ada held out a piece, and Vincent took it.

The sky was a pure, clear blue.

When he looked straight ahead, he noticed that many of the passersby who were walking up and down the avenue seemed to

be young couples.

Every face wore a bright smile, as if something about all this was fun.

A bright world.

I hate bright places, Vincent thought.

“It’s nice and sweet, isn’t it?”

Ada’s voice made him look over. She was nibbling at her piece, eating elegantly.

She had one hand to her cheek, and she looked happy.

This broad avenue might be a standard date spot. The scene fizzed with young energy, and the fact that he was there, right in the middle of it, made the situation feel utterly unreal to Vincent.

He looked down at his own apple pie.

What am I doing…?

A feeling like irritation, and also like confusion, monopolized his heart.

“Vincent-sama?”

Vincent was staring at what he held in his hands, and Ada spoke to him. Her tone seemed to ask, *Aren’t you going to eat it?*

Vincent smiled back at her. Of course, there was nothing sincere about it.

“Thank you…” he said, and put it to his lips. He took a bite, then swallowed.

Piecrust, apples, custard. All the flavors seemed unremarkable to him.

Then Ada murmured, “Oh.”

At the sound, Vincent looked at her. Ada giggled softly.

“Vincent-sama, you have cream on the corner of your mouth.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I’m not used to eating this way…”

At Ada’s comment, Vincent moved to wipe the corner of his lips with a fingertip.

But then Ada said, “Please wait.” Her tone sounded slightly feverish.

What? Vincent looked at her, questioningly. For some reason, Ada was blushing.

She screwed up her courage and spoke eagerly:

“I’ll get it for you. Please don’t move.”

“No, that’s—”

“I-it’s all right. Um, hold still.”

“…Sure.”

Thinking that if this was what she wanted, he’d let her do it, Vincent waited for Ada to make her move.

He’d assumed she’d take out her handkerchief or something, but he was wrong. Gently, she stretched her hand out toward Vincent’s lips.

Then, nervously, she stroked the corner of Vincent’s mouth with her index finger, wiping away the custard. Ada drew her hand back.

Just as Vincent was wondering what she was planning to do about that finger…

“……Mm.”

Heart pounding, cheeks flushed, Ada softly put the fingertip into her mouth.

Vincent watched her, wordlessly.

With her fingertip still in her mouth, Ada held very still. Time passed: one second, two seconds, three…

And then:

“_____!!”

Suddenly, Ada blushed so red it was as if her face had caught fire.

She gave a pretty little scream—“Eeek!”—and leapt up from the bench.

Then:

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

With a long shriek, she took off.

She moved incredibly fast.

In no time at all, with enough force to kick up a dust cloud, she’d run to the end of the avenue, disappearing from Vincent’s view.

Vincent had been silent the entire time.

Finally, he got up from the bench where he’d been abandoned, looking in the direction where Ada had vanished.

He muttered one word:

“……Hey.”

What was that? Exactly what kind of development was that…?!

The situation was beyond comprehension.

Ada had probably wanted to flee from the shame of what she’d done; that much he

understood. She wasn't the type to go off on her own and leave someone behind, so it was likely that even *she* didn't understand what was going on.

For a moment, Vincent considered just going home. …But that wouldn't do.

Five minutes passed, then ten.

He'd waited because he'd thought she'd come right back, but there was no sign of her.

Was Ada still running around somewhere? Had she gotten lost?

He should probably go look for her. Common sense said that was what he was supposed to do, and ordinarily, he would already have been doing it, without hesitation.

But.

"—I am absolutely not going," Vincent declared, decisively.

I don't want to go today, no matter what. She's already dragging me around and causing me trouble with her arbitrary plans. Why should I have to do a thing like that? On the contrary, if she's managed to get herself into a sticky

situation somewhere, I'll sneer at her. I'll applaud. The woman needs to realize just what a foolish creature she is…

As he muttered to himself silently, Vincent kept waiting for Ada.

Twenty minutes passed.

What is that dullard doing? How long does she intend to make me wait? Go to hell!

Thirty minutes.

Vincent was standing in front of the bench. Even he didn't know why he wasn't sitting down to wait.

It might simply have been pride.

Go to hell, go to hell, go to hell, go to hell, go to hell.

Forty minutes.

Go to hell, go to…hell… Go to—

Fifty minutes.

……

Vincent, who'd been standing the whole time, was completely exhausted.

Because he'd stood stock-still and kept silently hurling abuse, his head had grown

hazy. His eyes were getting dim.

…*What am I doing…?*

Once again, a basic question welled up inside him. And then:

“I-I’m so sorry…Vincent-sama…”

By the time Ada returned, it had been an hour.

Had she run around for the whole hour, or had she lost her way and walked?

Ada’s forehead was faintly sweaty, and she cowered apologetically in front of Vincent.

“I’m sorry! I’m really sorry! I left you alone, Vincent-sama, and I—”

“……”

Vincent’s face seemed drained of all life. He was silent.

“Vincent…sama…?”

Vincent was unresponsive, and Ada called to him timidly:

“U-um, are you…? You *are* angry, aren’t you…?”

At this question, Vincent somehow managed to pull a frail smile onto his weary

face. The delicate smile went right to the hearts of a couple of women who happened to be passing by, and they staggered.

Vincent barely managed to force out the words:

“No, I’m just glad you’re all right, Ada-sama…”

He felt like complimenting himself on his own self-control.

* * *

“—All right, what do you youngsters want me to divine?”

In a cramped room filled with blue tobacco smoke, a wrinkly old woman shrouded in a robe held her hands poised over a crystal ball.

This was the Hall of Divination. He’d been brought here by Ada, and as he stepped into the suspicious-looking booth, Vincent’s face wore an indescribably complicated expression.

I’m tired, and now this? …Fortune-telling?

Colorful stones had been placed on the table where the old woman sat, and the room was decorated here and there with animal

skulls. The walls held several tapestries with magic circles drawn on them, much to Vincent's disgust.

When he looked at Ada, she was faltering in response to the old woman's question—"I, um, well"—and stealing glances at Vincent.

Tell her anything. I just want to get this over with and go home…

He kept it out of his expression, but internally, Vincent grumbled.

By this point, the only thought in his mind was how to end this sheer nuisance of a date.

I see, he thought suddenly, and he spoke:

"Do you suppose you could divine our compatibility, madam?"

Ada looked startled. Apparently she hadn't expected Vincent to broach the subject.

He smiled back at her, coolly.

The old woman's lips twisted into a smirk, and she laughed: "Fuo-fuo-fuo!

"Your compatibility, hmm? Oho! Hubba-hubba!"

"Yes, it's very important to us, you see…"

“Vincent-sama.”

Ada called his name, softly. Vincent spoke a bit more firmly, as if to drive his point home:

“Tell us the unvarnished truth, please.”

At Vincent’s words, the old woman nodded solemnly.

“Of course. My crystal ball speaks nothing but truth. I’m simply the messenger.”

“That’s fine.” Vincent nodded, looking satisfied.

Ada had clasped her hands in front of her chest. Her expression was a mixture of unease and anticipation.

Slowly, the old woman began to move the hands that hovered over the crystal ball. She wiggled her fingers as if stroking the globe’s surface and began to chant an incantation in a mumbling voice that was hard to make out. He heard Ada gulp.

She was gazing at the crystal ball so eagerly it was as if she could see something there, too.

Vincent only watched them, quietly.

It's bad. It has to be bad. It could never be good. There's no way this woman and I are compatible. It has to be the worst ever. If that's the case, this dunce of a woman will be discouraged, and no doubt she'll think it's impossible to spend the whole day having fun. Seeing her face like that will cheer me up a bit, too. Then this useless time will be over. I worked very hard today—

As he was patting himself on the back this way, the old woman, who was peering into the crystal ball, cried out: "Oh, oh, ohhhh!" Startled, Ada asked:

"Wh-what's the matter?"

The old woman's hands trembled where they hovered over the crystal ball, and her expression was flabbergasted.

"…How can this be? I don't believe it. Th-this much… *This* much? Impossible! I've never seen such a result in all my born days! How terrifying—"

Vincent's lips threatened to curve with delight.

Heh-heh-heh! I see! It's bad, is it? So very bad it yet frightens the fortune-teller. It is. Of course it is. Go on, say it! Smite this woman

with despair!

Even as he came close to laughing in triumph, he asked dispassionately:

“What truth did the crystal ball tell you, then?”

The old woman spoke in a voice that was filled with confidence and certainty:

“Mm. Your affinity is—”

““Our affinity is?””

Vincent and Ada’s voices overlapped, each made intense by their different emotions.

Then the old woman declared:

“It’s phenomenal!!”

Vincent blinked rapidly. All he could do was mutter, “Huh……?”

“—Not only that, I’ve never seen a couple who are *this* compatible. That’s how fantastic it is. It’s so good it’s terrifying. Your personalities, your interests, your tastes: Every little thing is perfect. Your luck in marriage is also prime, no doubt about it. It says you’ll be blessed with children, too.”

On the verge of screaming “That’s impossible!” Vincent stepped forward.

What he actually wanted was to close in on the woman, haul her up by her shirtfront, and shake her violently as he demanded an explanation.

“A-are you sure there’s no mistake? Your crystal ball truly…*truly* said that?”

Vincent’s voice was trembling.

That can’t be! There must be some mistake—There has to be!

However, as if to strike the final blow, the old woman spoke. Gravely. With a solemn face.

“Your fates…

“They attract each other. By now, I doubt you could separate if you tried.”

……*That’s insane.*

He was dumbfounded. The phrase “as if he’d lost his soul” most certainly applied to Vincent right now.

When, cautiously, moving creakily, he looked over at Ada…

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeekk!”

Without warning, she gave a pretty scream.

Her face was burning with embarrassment, and she broke into a run, leaving the Hall of Divination.

He didn't even have time to call for her to stop.

In the Hall of Divination Ada had vacated, Vincent stood all alone.

The old woman nodded several times with a worldly-wise expression. Then she spoke to him, pityingly:

"You look like a popular one…but you'll just have to resign yourself. Hoo-hoo-hoo."

Senile old hag. Should I kill her?

Vincent seriously considered it.

Outside the Hall of Divination, Vincent waited for Ada.

Pride wasn't the reason he hadn't gone to look for her this time. He just didn't have the strength or the energy for it.

……

In a little while—he'd stopped keeping an eye on the time—Ada came back.

"…I'm sorry. I was flustered…"

As he looked at the apologetic girl, irritation began to well up inside Vincent.

This woman and me, compatible? Impossible. Fortune-telling is never accurate; it was a mistake to rely on it. It just made her get more carried away. "Phenomenal affinity"? What an awful joke. Me, with this imbecile? As if I'd ever stand for that!

Ada's voice didn't reach his ears. He railed inwardly, at length.

"Um, that fortune—"

Not noticing Vincent's internal turmoil, Ada spoke, shyly:

"It made me really happy, Vincent-sama."

At this point, he should have responded to her tactfully, but the words slipped out:

"Curl up and die."

"Huh?" Ada looked blank.

"No, it's nothing."

He'd cut it close, but in the blink of an eye, Vincent managed to gloss things over with a bright, flawless smile.

Ada tilted her head, puzzled.

The sky was as clear as ever. Their date was nowhere near its end.

4

After they'd spent time on the wide avenue…

Next, under the slanting afternoon sunlight, Vincent was taken to a small care facility in the heart of town. There was a plain, two-story building, and a yard that wasn't all that spacious, with a splendid elm growing in its center. The facility was surrounded by a low wall.

Haaaaah…

Inwardly, Vincent heaved a long sigh. He'd lost track of how many times he'd done this.

I want to go home. That was the only thought left in his head.

"Ada-sama, what is this place…?" Vincent asked.

The gate of the care facility was standing open, and Ada had gone on ahead, passing through it.

Vincent followed her, and just as he went through the gate:

“Yaaaaaay, it’s Ada-sama! ☆” Voices called out from around the yard. Several children who seemed to have been playing there crowded around Ada and, behind her, Vincent. Startled in spite of himself, Vincent recoiled.

With a warm smile that was different from the one she wore when she and Vincent were alone, Ada said:

“Yes, children, hello.”

From the way the children were dressed, they all seemed to be commoners. Some of the children who pressed around them latched onto Ada’s skirt, but Ada was apparently used to this, and she let them do as they pleased. She didn’t seem to mind that her dress would get dirty.

Vincent hung back behind Ada, and several children approached him as well, looking up at him with faces that seemed to ask, *Who’s this?*

“…It’s an orphanage. Children who aren’t able to stay with their parents for one reason or another come here.”

As Ada answered Vincent's earlier question, she looked toward the building and nodded a greeting. When Vincent followed her gaze, he saw that an elderly lady had appeared in the entrance to the building. She bowed her head reverently to Ada.

I see. Vincent understood. The elderly lady was probably the facility's proprietress.

As she stroked the heads of the children who gathered around her, Ada spoke:

"Uncle Oscar told me that the House of Vessalius helps to fund this facility… I thought there might be something I could do, too. And so, every so often, I stop by to visit and read picture books to them."

…What, you simply wanted to show me how very kind you are?

Deciding that had been Ada's reason for bringing him here, Vincent smiled coolly.

"Bright, sunlit places like this—They really do suit you, don't they."

The words he spoke were intended to be a harmless compliment to Ada. However, once they were out, they had a cold, ironic edge to them that surprised even him. At his words,

Ada looked a little perplexed.

“Vincent…sama?”

“Ah, I don’t get out very much myself… I was a little envious, that’s all.”

Vincent spoke as if in jest, and Ada gave a little giggle.

“Reading outside is nice every once in a while, you know.”

As Ada spoke, the children who clustered around her pestered her to read the rest of the book she’d read the last time she came. Some of them even ran to the facility to get it, without waiting for Ada’s response.

Once she started reading aloud, she’d keep the children company for a while, leaving Vincent on his own. Possibly it pricked her conscience to do this in the middle of their date: Ada looked at Vincent, her face troubled. Vincent shook his head, telling her it was nothing to worry about.

“Go ahead and read to them, Ada-sama. I’ll keep my distance.”

“What?”

Ada looked confused, and Vincent told her he was a little tired and intended to rest in

the shade of the trees.

…I refuse to spend time with silly, noisy brats.

* * *

"'A young lady of the House of Vessalius pays a charity visit to an orphanage,' hmm…?"

From a bench in the shade of the trees in a corner of the yard, Vincent turned cold eyes on Ada.

Ada was sitting on a floral-patterned sheet that the children had brought and spread at the base of the elm in the center of the yard, holding an open picture book. The children had formed a circle around her. She was reading aloud, but her voice didn't reach Vincent.

However, he could tell that she was reading in a gentle voice, and that the children were listening eagerly.

…I suppose Gil and I were about that age when we were abandoned, Vincent thought as he gazed at the children.

Still, even if they had no parents, no doubt the children at this facility had warm beds to shelter them from the rain and dew, and

were given enough food to keep them from being hungry.

How fortunate they were.

He reflected on his own past. It hadn't been at all unusual for him to sleep outside, freezing and exposed to the elements, and he'd sometimes been so hungry he'd eaten food that was all but rotten, practically garbage. With his red eye, as a "child of ill omen," he'd been driven away from care facilities like this one.

If a facility had taken them in back then, what would have happened?

"……?"

Abruptly, Vincent's eyes came to rest on two children in front of Ada. Two boys, sitting companionably, shoulder to shoulder. They seemed to be brothers.

The slightly smaller one who was probably the younger brother was leaning forward, listening to Ada read; sometimes he clapped his hands and bounced up and down. Next to him, his older brother admonished him, but even as he did so, he seemed to be enjoying himself. As she read, from time to time Ada would pause for a moment and smile at the

brothers.

Oh…

In the soft, dappled sunlight under the tree.

Depending on the viewer, the gentle sight might have given the impression that the flow of time itself had slowed.

Of course, Vincent wasn’t in possession of such naive sensibilities.

However.

Oh…

For a moment, Vincent felt something like dizziness. His vision blurred.

Then, to his hazy eyes…

The figures of the two brothers who were listening to Ada as she read, the ones Ada smiled at…seemed to overlap with those of another pair…

That's…

"Aaaah! This guy's staring!"

Abruptly, a voice spoke from beside the bench where he was sitting, and Vincent came back to his senses. It felt almost like waking from a dream. The memory of what he'd seen, and even of what he'd been thinking, evaporated in an instant.

When he looked in the direction of the voice, he found an energetic-looking little kid standing near him, in front and a little off to the side.

Apparently he hadn't joined the ring, and instead had kept playing by himself, even when Ada had started reading.

…*What did he just say?* Vincent thought.

He hadn’t caught the words clearly, but a strange irritation was growing inside him.

He didn’t have to go to the trouble of asking him. The kid repeated himself, cheerfully:

“He was staring at Ada-sama! I know he was! I *saw* him!”

Vincent wanted to shout at him, tell him to quit spouting nonsense, but he only answered in a cold voice:

“……I wasn’t really staring.”

It was silly to deal with a mere child as an equal.

The best policy was not to take him seriously, he thought. He let his eyes drift away from the boy, focusing on the middle distance. He planned to ignore anything else the kid said. Once he knew he couldn’t get a rise out of Vincent, the boy would get bored and go off somewhere.

However.

With the beings known as children, adult expectations seldom hold true.

The boy raised his voice even further, yelling:

“Staring-staring-staring!! I *know*! He was looking over there and spacing out!! He looked all dazed and soppy!! Nyah-nyah, he’s blushing!!”

“……”

In that instant, what welled up inside Vincent might have been unmistakable bloodlust. —Maybe.

He no longer felt like holding back just because he was dealing with a child.

The boy’s shouts must have carried.

When Vincent shot a glance in her direction out of the corner of his eye, Ada had stopped reading and was looking at them, as were all the children around her. It was a tiresome situation. However, fortunately, at this distance, his voice wouldn’t reach Ada if he lowered it slightly. Vincent gave a warm smile, as though he was speaking in a friendly way.

Then he said it.

…In an icy-cold whisper that was very close to absolute zero.

“Powerless little monkey. You couldn’t even survive on your own. Do you want to be

completely exsanguinated and killed?”

It was so sinister, Death himself might have run away in tears.

However, although the boy had heard it…

“Huh?”

…He didn’t understand what Vincent had said, and he only stood there, openmouthed. *Tch!* Mentally, Vincent clicked his tongue. Once more, he quickly checked the relative distance between Ada and himself. Then he put out a hand to the boy’s cheek and pinched it. Hard.

From where Ada was, it would only look as if he’d set his hand against the boy’s cheek.

He wouldn’t be satisfied unless he made this kid cry at least.

Go on, cry disgracefully! Scream and wail! Twist that filthy little face and beg for forgiveness!

However, the child must not have felt much pain, and he began grinning, as though they’d started playing a fun game. Then he said, “Yah!” and stretched out a hand toward Vincent’s face. He grabbed Vincent’s cheek,

just as Vincent had grabbed his, and pinched it hard.

There they were, pinching each other's cheeks.

It looked exactly as if he was playing with the kid.

* * *

"Tee-hee! They look like they're having fun."

From the middle of the ring of children, Ada watched the scene in the shade under the trees.

The boy Vincent was playing with was one of the most difficult children at the facility. When Ada read picture books, he always kept playing by himself, never joining the circle. She'd never seen him have so much fun playing with someone else before.

To Ada's eyes, the scene looked truly heartwarming, and it seemed to shine.

"I'm so glad I came here with Vincent-sama."

Ada's murmur came straight from the heart.

* * *

Go on, cry! Writhe in agony! Scream your lungs out!

How long had Vincent spent pinching cheeks with the child?

Abruptly, as if he'd tired of the game, the boy let go of Vincent's cheek, shook off the hand that was pinching his own cheek, and ran away. Vincent thought it was odd for the boy to just run off like that, but when he glanced over, Ada had come up beside him.

"Thank you so much for playing with that child."

"Huh—?"

Vincent blinked.

"You're good at making friends with children, aren't you, Vincent-sama? Even though you were tired…"

Ada's voice and expression carried gratitude, envy, and, on top of that, respect.

Finding himself the focus of that dazzling look, Vincent…

"Ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, oh, it's nothing so impressive."

…gave an answer that couldn't possibly

have been more cheerful.

He sounded slightly broken.

His fatigue and the pain of his smarting, burning cheek ran around and around in his head, getting all mixed up together.

Then, in the back of his mind:

All that, and I still didn't manage to make him cry…

Today was, without a doubt, a plague day. It didn't feel as though anything he did would go right.

—There was nothing to do but laugh.

Then, when Ada had finished reading the picture book, just as they were leaving the facility…

At the gate:

"Ada-sama, you're leaving already? Noooo, don't go!" the children said, crowding around Ada, not wanting to say good-bye. Some of them even grabbed her dress, determined not to let her leave. Ada smiled, looking a little troubled, and soothed the children:

"I'll come again. Okay? I promise."

Vincent wasn't interested in the exchange, and he let his gaze drift away from Ada. Then his eyes found two children standing by themselves, a little apart from the rest.

It was the two brothers.

The younger brother was fidgeting nervously, and the older brother was speaking to him intently. A closer look showed that the younger brother held a small paper tube in his hands. The older brother's voice came to Vincent faintly, and he gathered that it was a picture the younger brother had drawn for Ada.

"Look, you're going to give it to Ada-sama, aren't you? You drew it and everything."

"But…it didn't come out very well…"

"If you keep saying things like that, Ada-sama's going to leave."

Even though the older brother urged him on, the younger brother didn't seem to have the confidence to move.

"I guess I'll have to," the older brother said. He took the paper tube from his little brother's hands and broke into a run, heading toward them. Apparently he was

going to give it to Ada for his brother. However, he wasn't paying enough attention to his feet: The older brother stepped on a round rock that was lying on the ground and took a terrific tumble.

Vincent just watched. His expression was blank, and it held absolutely no emotion.

"……"

Silently, Vincent walked over to the older brother. He stood beside the boy, who was groaning softly.

He hadn't done it because he had some sort of goal or idea. There was no reason.

The older brother looked up at him with tears in his eyes. Wordlessly, Vincent reached out and picked him up. He lowered him to the ground, setting him on his feet.

As the boy looked at him, bewildered, Vincent silently dusted off his clothes for him.

"Th-thanks," the older brother told him, and Vincent…

"……"

Silent as ever, he moved away from the boy, returning to the gate.

—Then.

His eyes met Ada's. She was watching him from where she stood at the gate. Surrounded by children, Ada clasped her hands in front of her chest, and her expression was a mixture of delight, deep emotion, and respect. The atmosphere around her was soft and sweet, and she looked like a starry-eyed dreamer.

Her entire body was exuding ardent affection.

……*Huh?!*

Vincent froze slightly, as if he'd been caught at something he couldn't afford to be caught at.

5

The final item on the agenda was “Tea and conversation at a salon.”

Salons were places where the aristocracy mingled socially, and there were all kinds of them. The salon to which Ada took Vincent was an elegant, two-story mansion. A certain great nobleman seemed to have opened his entire private residence as a salon.

Because of the abundant silverwork placed throughout its beautiful garden, the salon was known as Silver Moon Garden.

It had one distinctive feature that set it apart from other salons.

Twice each month, for three days each time…

An event known as “the Sport of the Masks” was held at Silver Moon Garden.

“I thought the orphanage was the last thing… Will this really be the last one…?”

In a costume room on the first floor of the Silver Moon Garden mansion, just off the entry hall, Vincent muttered wearily.

All four walls of the room were buried behind a wide variety of costumes, hung in rows. They were really more like fancy-dress disguises than costumes: things like a set of vampire fangs and a cape, or fairy clothing with ornamental insect wings fixed to the back.

The costume room held all sorts of disguises from all eras and countries.

—All for the Sport of the Masks.

For three days, they gather in the salon and play dress-up… This is why I can't stand aristocrats, Vincent thought contemptuously, scowling.

His eyes slid to the side, glancing at one of the walls. Vincent was in the men's costume room; Ada was in the room next door, on the other side of the wall, picking out a disguise and changing into it. Vincent remembered how Ada had looked when they'd parted ways in the entry hall to enter the costume rooms.

Ada had seemed excited about putting on

something she normally couldn't wear.

What a day this has been. It really is a plague day…

As he muttered and complained, Vincent searched for a fairly normal costume. Before long, he found an old, outdated nobleman's costume and decided to wear it. Once he'd settled on a disguise, the male costume attendant who waited near the door came over and helped him change.

After he'd dressed, he returned to the entry hall. Ada wasn't there yet. He was well aware that women took time to change their clothes. Vincent was bored stiff; he turned his back to the door to the women's costume room and watched the passing guests and servers.

He quickly tired of this and turned his gaze to the chandelier that hung from the ceiling of the entry hall.

That woman—

He thought of Ada, in the dressing room.

What sort of ridiculous getup is she planning to appear in…?

He remembered the witch costume he'd

seen her in before, the one with the peaked hat, at the secondary Vessalius residence. He really couldn't tolerate drinking tea and chatting with Ada when she looked like that. Privately, he decided that if she came out wearing something weird, he'd leave immediately.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen.

Becoming first irritated, then exasperated, Vincent was enrobed in a prickly aura when he heard the door open behind him. As it did, he heard Ada's voice.

"Thank you for waiting, Vincent-sama. I'm sorry I'm late…"

Vincent instantly extinguished his black mien and turned around. His face wore a perfect, flawless smile.

"No. For men, the time women spend polishing themselves is supreme bliss—"

Before he could finish the insincere line, it died on his lips.

—Huh?

Vincent looked at Ada, who'd come out of the women's dressing room.

He watched her as she came toward him

timidly, blushing as if she was embarrassed.

As he gazed at her, in the costume she'd changed into…

…—

His thoughts went pure white.

Wh…why…?

The thought was practically a gasp.

Ada was dressed as a man.

And when dressed in men's clothes, she resembled someone Vincent knew very well, someone he could never forget.

It was an inexplicable feeling, as if time had been wound back into the distant past. Back to his world… His and his brother Gilbert's world, the world of a hundred years ago.

It was as if Vincent was being drawn toward Ada; he couldn't look away. Finding herself stared at silently, Ada said, "I had a hard time making up my mind, but I knew I'd never be able to wear men's clothes at any other time, so… Is it odd?" She shrank into herself a bit.

However, her words didn't reach Vincent's

ears. In a hoarse voice, too faint for anyone to catch, he murmured:

"…….Jack?"

Jack Vessalius. The man known as the hero of the Tragedy of Sablier, a century ago.

The first person who'd taken the young Vincent and Gilbert under his wing, when the world had rejected them. To Vincent, the young man was…or had been…irreplaceable, precious, in a way that was different from his brother Gilbert.

Involuntarily, Vincent took a step forward. Unconsciously, he drew nearer, reaching for Ada in her men's costume.

He caught her arm, pulled her nearer. He wanted to get a closer look at her.

Vincent's eyes began at Ada's head and traveled down. Hair bound into a braid, emerald eyes, the slender bridge of the nose, the lips.

Jack——

His eyes traced her figure, and soon reached her chest.

—Not Jack?!

Vincent gave a full-body shudder, as if he'd been struck by lightning.

Even in men's clothing, there was no way to hide Ada's chest. It pushed up the jacket from the inside, asserting its ample curves. It was a magnificent bosom, the sort that no doubt earned her the envy of many women.

"What's wrong?" Ada looked at Vincent anxiously. Then, following the direction of his gaze, she realized what it was focused on. A small cry escaped her, and she covered her chest with her arms.

Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, and although she was trying to say something, the words wouldn't come.

"I, um, uh, Vincent-sama…"

What in the world is *this woman?!* Must *she be so confusing…?!*

He stared at the chest Ada was trying to hide as if it had been his enemy for long years. He glared.

The blood rushed to his head; it felt as if his veins would burst. Combined with the accumulated fatigue, it made his head reel.

He staggered. Hastily, Ada put out her

hands to support him.

“Are you all right, Vincent-sama?!”

“I’m fine… I’m just a little tired; that’s all. If I could rest on a sofa…”

He spoke faintly, and Ada hastily called to a nearby server.

* * *

Guided by the server, the two of them entered a guest room.

Vincent lowered himself weakly onto a sofa by the window, leaning into its back.

Soon he drifted, sinking into a light doze. His consciousness receded.

Then, for a little while, he dreamed.

Jack was in the dream. A distant scene from a century ago. Himself, very young, playing with Jack.

He was also in the dream somewhere, watching the two of them from up above. It was that sort of dream.

The child-Vincent was smiling with an innocence he couldn’t even imagine from his current self.

I look like I'm having fun…

As he thought this, his mind surfaced again.

He was aware that he was in a private room in the salon. However, his mind was still half-asleep, and he felt light, as if he were floating.

Without much thought, he looked to the side. Ada was there, sitting on the sofa just as he was, looking at him. Her gaze was solicitous, kindly watching over him. When his dazed eyes met hers, she gave a faint smile.

Jack——

In reality, Ada didn't look all that much like Jack.

However, those emerald eyes were just like his. Although the resemblance might have been emphasized by the men's clothes she wore, her features certainly seemed to make it clear that she and Jack belonged to the same bloodline. These things made them overlap in Vincent's mind, although their genders were different.

The shape of someone he thought he'd

never see again.

“Vincent…sama.”

Ada spoke softly.

Her voice came from right beside him, and yet it also seemed as though he was hearing it from somewhere far away.

As she looked at him, her emerald eyes were filled with an endless calm.

“You had that expression in your eyes when you looked at me earlier, too. Have you mistaken me for someone else?”

Ada’s voice reached Vincent’s mind like water slowly soaking in.

“Yes. Someone who was kind to me, long ago…”

For some reason, he answered honestly. Ada’s voice responded to his, gently, as if embracing him: “I see.”

She hadn’t urged him on at all, but Vincent continued:

“He always had a kind smile… When I was with him, before I knew it I’d find myself smiling, too… It made me happy just to be with him.”

“You liked him, didn’t you.”

“Yes. He was special… A very special person—”

Thoughts he’d never spoken of, had never intended to speak of, to anyone, fell from his lips without any resistance.

Even so, it didn’t feel unnatural to him.

However.

“Truly precious—”

Why am I blabbering on so? I’ve never told these things to anyone…

As he kept speaking, a tiny doubt was born in a corner of his mind.

Gradually, little by little, it expanded, until Vincent came back to himself with an awful jolt.

_____*!!*

Immediately, he flushed red. He started away from the backrest as if stung, clapping a hand over his mouth. It was as if he was trying to swallow the words he’d spoken back down again. Even as he was engulfed by shame and confusion, Vincent managed to speak in a strangled voice:

"…I'm sorry. I've been saying odd things. Forget…"

He trailed off without finishing the sentence.

His eyes turned to Ada. This time, she was the one leaning against the back of the sofa, breathing lightly, fast asleep.

She must have been tired as well: While she was waiting for the rest of what he was saying, she'd fallen asleep.

Vincent gazed at Ada coldly.

With a small snort at her defenselessly sleeping form, he leaned back, resettling himself. At that, Ada promptly stirred, and her head came to rest lightly on Vincent's shoulder. Ada leaned on him, and her sleeping face was perfectly at ease.

He opened his mouth to say something, but in the end, he shut it again without saying anything.

It would have been easy to shove her head away.

But.

Today really is a plague day—

Vincent let her stay that way for a while.

* * *

When they left Silver Moon Garden, the sunlight was slanting, and the sky had begun to turn vermillion.

Back in their own clothes, Vincent and Ada walked away from the mansion's gate. All that was left to do now was return to the memorial park where they'd met that morning and go their separate ways. The two of them didn't speak much as they walked. The long day was finally over.

Vincent thought he couldn't remember ever living through a day that had tired him so much.

"Um, could you leave the choice of where we go today to me?"

"Thank you, Ada-sama."

If I'd only refused her then, the day wouldn't have turned out like this…

He felt like lodging a complaint with his former self.

As Vincent walked down the cobbled street, a black carriage passed by him, traveling in the opposite direction. When,

absently, he turned his head to watch it, following it with his eyes, he saw the carriage stop in front of Silver Moon Garden. A new visitor, apparently.

Vincent's gaze grew contemptuous. *A lowbrow aristocrat, come to play dress-up*, he thought, acidly.

The carriage door opened, and a man emerged.

That's…

At the sight of the man who'd disembarked at the gate, Vincent stopped, and his eyes widened slightly.

…Basil.

The man who'd left his carriage and hurried into Silver Moon Garden certainly was the head of the Basil family. It was the man Vincent had been pursuing for a while. The obnoxious fly that was snooping around the House of Nightray.

To think he'd spot a man in a place like this who'd been so careful not to give himself away…

I may be able to use this.

A thin smile appeared on Vincent's lips.

Seeing Vincent stop, Ada stopped, too. “What is it?” she asked.

He shook his head—*It’s nothing*—and began to walk again.

He felt as if this plague-ridden day, during which he’d been dragged around endlessly, might have finally paid off a bit.

In the end, even this woman was mildly useful…

When he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, Ada seemed to sense his gaze. She turned to him, smiling shyly.

He smiled back at her.

“That was a very nice place, Silver Moon Garden. I liked it.”

6

By the time they reached the memorial park, the sunset had dyed the whole sky vermillion.

Beside the main gate, in front of the bench on which Ada had been sitting when they met, Vincent said good-bye:

“All right, Ada-sama. Let’s meet ag—”

“Um!”

Ada spoke, interrupting him. Her expression was uncertain, as if she wasn’t sure whether it was all right to ask.

“What is it?”

“Well, um… Did you enjoy yourself today?”

Apparently she was concerned about the results of the date she’d taken charge of.

How should I answer that? Vincent thought. Even if he couldn’t outright rail at her, Ada was dense, and she probably wouldn’t notice

a little abuse.

“I did…Ada-sama.”

The line he spoke wasn’t the least bit sincere. Ada looked relieved.

Vincent continued:

“Only next time—”

He was planning to lace the following words with sarcasm.

However, when he’d gotten that far, a scene unexpectedly surfaced in Vincent’s mind.

The yard at the care facility.

Ada reading a picture book, surrounded by the orphans.

The brothers, listening eagerly.

The warm smile Ada had given them.

For a brief moment, these things flickered through Vincent’s mind.

“Next time—”

His lips moved, half-unconsciously. Ada was waiting for his next words.

“Would you read a book of some sort to me as well?”

Even he didn't know why he'd blurted out such a request. Ada didn't seem to have expected it, either; for a little while, she looked blank. Then she realized that Vincent was referring to her reading aloud at the care facility, and she broke into a delighted smile.

When she spoke, Ada looked straight at Vincent:

"Yes. When I do, I'll read it just for you, Vincent-sama."

That warmth—

She spoke with the same warm smile she'd given the brothers at the facility.

Having parted with Ada, Vincent walked down the road to the Nightray manor.

He was tired. He wanted to hurry back to the manor and sleep. He shot a cold glance up at the evening sky.

I wish it would hurry up and get dark.

He hated bright places. He felt as if he didn't belong in them.

Under a clear blue sky, under a warm evening sky… Neither world was meant for him.

Vincent preferred night. Especially black nights with no moonlight, when darkness covered everything.

It was as if he hoped it would blot out his own existence as well.

…But for just a little longer—

Yes. As long as it was at the very end of this plague day, the likes of which he'd probably never see again.

For the time until I reach the manor, I suppose it's all right…

Vincent walked along, under the evening sky.

As he walked, he wondered what sort of book that woman would bring, next time they met.

~ Fin ~

The Story
of
a Dream Weaver

SIMPLE WORK, SIMPLE FACT

Light in the Darkness

· 5:30 AM

Got up at usual time. …A lingering sense of dreaming. Content unclear.

· 8:12

Lots of stuffed animals Vincent-sama ordered from a tradesman were delivered. More than thirty. Vincent-sama was holding his scissors, and he looked very happy.

· 8:30

The sound of scissors cutting things apart is coming from Vincent-sama's room.

· 9:30

The sound of scissors cutting things apart is coming from Vincent-sama's room.

A new servant went into Vincent-sama's room.

A few seconds later, there was a scream. A minute later, the servant came out of the room looking half-dead.

Apparently it was the first time the servant had been in that room.

· 2:47 PM

Vincent-sama gave new orders that begin tomorrow.

An undercover investigation at Silver Moon Garden, a high-class salon.

The subject of the investigation is the head of the Basil family.

Basil? Don’t know that family.

· 6:29

Remembered part of the dream.

Think Oz Vessalius was in it.

1

Undercover investigation. Surveillance. Sometimes personal security.

These were Echo's main duties as Vincent Nightray's valet. If Vincent told her to go, she'd go anywhere, and if Vincent told her to observe someone, she'd watch them no matter who they were. If Vincent said to investigate, she'd investigate absolutely anything.

There were many people around Vincent who took his orders and acted on them, but for particularly secret activities, no one was better than Echo. That meant that when Echo received an order to investigate, the matter was one for which failure was not an option.

Of course, Echo had no intention of failing in any case. No matter how difficult the order, she had to carry it out and bring back

the result Vincent wanted, full stop. Echo was well aware that this was the only thing that gave her existence value.

As a result, she'd never objected to any order, had never complained, and had never even thought of giving up.

She was a doll.

She considered herself a doll that moved as her master wished her to.

But.

Th-this is…awful…

In one of the guest rooms at the Silver Moon Garden salon, Echo was shivering all over. The room held several aristocratic guests who were seated around tables, wearing fanciful costumes and chatting happily. Their eyes were turned eagerly on Echo.

The nobles sent compliments and demands at her, one after another.

"All right, twirl for us once, right where you are."

"Make sure your skirt flares out. That's key."

“Don’t forget to give us a ‘Meow ♪’ at the end.”

“Yes, and look a bit embarrassed when you say it. I must have that.”

Echo, who was dressed in a maid costume with a cat-ears headband, remained outwardly calm, but mentally, she was already close to her limit.

If someone would give her just ten seconds, she thought, she’d happily carve up these aristocrats right this instant.

However, unfortunately, she couldn’t do that.

Why not? Because, at present, Echo was in the middle of waiting on customers as a server at Silver Moon Garden.

She couldn’t understand it.

According to what Vincent had told her, Silver Moon Garden was a high-class salon with traditions and status.

…And yet, the scene that was playing out in front of Echo was far from words like “tradition” and “status.”

“What are you doing, girl? Go on, spin. Make it energetic. Go!”

As the nobles urged her on, Echo couldn't help wondering to herself:

Why is this happening to Echo…?

She didn't even have to think about it. She knew why. Her master, Vincent Nightray, had ordered it.

Infiltrate Silver Moon Garden as a server and investigate the head of the Basil family, who would appear as a customer.

Echo hadn't heard the name Basil before. Apparently he was a low-ranking noble whom Vincent had been investigating for a little while. *"An obnoxious fly,"* he'd called him.

Vincent had also said, *"At the longest, this will be settled in three days…"*

Twice every month, a special event was held at Silver Moon Garden, running for three days each time. He'd said that Basil was certain to appear at the salon at some point during those three days.

He hadn't told her what went on during the special event. If Vincent wasn't inclined to talk about it, Echo didn't have the right to question him, but now she regretted not

having asked anyway. …Although it was true that, even if she'd known, there would have been nothing she could do about it.

Today was the first of the three days.

"S-sir…"

Forcing down her disgust, Echo managed to squeeze the words out:

"This salon does not provide that sort of entertainment. —If you'll excuse me."

She bowed slightly, turned on her heel, and left the room, hearing the dissatisfied voices of the aristocrats behind her. Once she was in the corridor, her shoulders drooped. "…Whew." She gave a tired sigh, leaning lightly against the wall. Then she let out another weary breath.

Vampires and pumpkin-headed monsters and walking carrots passed her in the corridor. It made one wonder what sort of haunted house this was.

"'The Sport of the Masks'—" Echo murmured, quietly.

That was the special event's official name. Apparently the salon owner had named it.

"…How pompous. It's just a costume

party.”

No matter how hard she tried, the words came out sounding like a complaint.

“Tee-hee. Not used to this yet, are you, ‘Eiko’-chan.”

A woman’s voice spoke from beside her. Echo came very close to retorting, “It’s Echo” on reflex, but she swallowed the words back just in time. The woman wasn’t wrong, she remembered. She wasn’t Echo right now. She was here under the alias “Eiko.”

She looked in the direction of the voice. The woman who was the head server at Silver Moon Garden was standing there. She wore a black robe with a long train, and there was a pointy hat on her head. In her hand, she held a priest’s staff with a crystal ball at its tip. She looked like a first-rate witch.

“I had some trouble adjusting, too, the first year I started working here. I’m used to it now, as you’d expect.”

The head server smiled wryly. Echo had heard that she was thirty-one years old and married.

In front of guests, she was a model server whose work was accurate and strict. However, when there were no guests around, she was easygoing and informal with her coworkers, and it felt easy to make friends with her. The other servers seemed to consider her highly reliable.

Echo looked steadily at the head server.

“Echo… Eiko would have preferred that costume.”

She spoke enviously (although she almost called herself “Echo,” as was her habit).

As an outfit to wear when serving guests, a witch costume was still ridiculous, but she thought it was significantly better… No, several *times* better than a cat-eared maid.

“Oh, but there’s nothing wrong with yours. It looks good on you, Eiko-chan.”

“That doesn’t make Eiko happy at all.”

Echo answered in an indifferent tone that had an edge of weariness to it.

As Vincent had ordered, Echo had begun working at this high-class salon that morning. As a new server, Echo had been trained by this woman, the head server, and

her very first job had been…choosing a costume. Although it had been called “a choice,” all the innocuous costumes had been taken earlier by other servers, and Echo hadn’t really had a choice.

From what she’d heard, Basil, the target of her investigation, would definitely appear at some point during these three days. Perhaps his hobby was dressing up. She had no intention of finding fault with other people’s hobbies, but Echo didn’t share his enthusiasm, and it was a nuisance.

“Well, shall we go back to the dressing room for a bit?”

At the head server’s prompting, Echo said, “Yes” and nodded, giving a small, relieved sigh at the idea that she’d be able to take a break. As the head server started walking, taking the lead, she spoke:

“It’s about time to change costumes, too.”

“……Beg pardon?”

Echo cocked her head, puzzled. She hadn’t quite caught the head server’s words.

Seeing her, the woman responded, “Didn’t I mention that?

“It’s a rule. During the Sport of the Masks, servers change costumes at regular intervals.”

“……”

Echo trailed silently after the head server.

In her head, she was already thinking of the journal entry she’d write that night. Ordinarily, she carried her journal around with her, writing down the various things she saw, but of course she didn’t take it along when she was undercover. She was planning to write down everything at once when she returned to the manor, and the day’s entry was shaping up to be a long one.

Half of it would be grumbling about Vincent, who’d sent her into Silver Moon Garden, and the other half would be criticism and complaints about the salon owner and the aristocratic clientele. If the head of the Basil family didn’t appear today, she’d probably direct some hostile words his way as well.

She wanted to hurry up and finish her investigation and leave this place. From the bottom of her heart.

Frankly, tonight’s journal entry will probably

be Echo's longest ever.

She was sure of it.

And then…

When the head server and Echo reached the dressing room, new costumes were waiting for them.

"……

Echo's silence grew even deeper.

Two new costumes were displayed in the dressing room. The owner had probably added them while Echo and the head server were working. "Wow…" Beside the speechless Echo, the head server gave an exclamation that could have been either impressed or appalled.

She walked over to the costumes that hung on hangers on the wall and pointed to them one after the other with her staff, making sure of the count.

Then she turned back to Echo.

"All right, Eiko-chan, which will it be? You can have first pick."

"The one you're wearing. The witch costume. "

With no hesitation, Echo pointed to the head server's costume. However, the woman gave her a wry, pitying smile.

"I'm sorry; it's already spoken for. This is a popular costume."

Everyone was thinking the same thing. The other servers had their sights set on the safe costumes as well. Reality was merciless.

"You first," the head server said, prompting Echo.

…There was no help for it. Reality was merciless, and fate was cruel. Echo had just two costumes to choose from.

They were:

A fur worn by a savage from an untamed land (very revealing).

A full-body, poisonous horned frog suit (sort of slimy).

Two extreme, worst-possible choices.

· 10:15 PM

Day One of the undercover investigation is over.

Far too much happened, don't want to write anything now.

· 1:30 AM

Woke in the middle of the night, so am adding a postscript.

Oz-sama was in dreams again.

Eko-chaaaaaan!!

2

“Know what, Echo? They say if you have the same dream three times, it will come true.”

Vincent had said this to Echo on the morning of her second day undercover at the Silver Moon Garden salon, before she’d left the Nightray manor.

The moment she’d heard it, her heart had flip-flopped. She hadn’t told Vincent about the dreams she’d had over the past two days. Even so, he’d said this. Had it been coincidence, or…? Echo tried to think, then came to the conclusion that thinking about it would do no good.

She’d tried to understand her master many times, and she’d never once succeeded.

Right now, she decided, it was more important to concentrate on ending her investigation as quickly as possible.

The Sport of the Masks—the costume party—was still going on.

Silver Moon Garden was a European-style,

two-story mansion that stood quietly in a district of aristocratic residences. By the time she reached it, fatigue was already weighing heavily on her back. Servers used the rear entrance. Feeling sick and tired, Echo went around to the back of the mansion.

The sky was clear.

The wind was a bit on the strong side today.

She passed through the small gate at the back, then walked to the mansion's back door. As she opened it, she said, "…Good morning," in a subdued voice.

As she did so, in a corner of her mind, she wondered whether she'd have the same dream again that night.

"Good morning, Eiko-chan. You're a little late."

When Echo entered the servers' dressing room, the head server was waiting for her. She'd already changed into her costume. She'd flung a black cape over her shoulders, and toy fangs peeked out of her mouth; they seemed to make it just a little hard for her to talk. It was a vampire disguise, apparently.

The words “You’re a little late” gave Echo a bad feeling. Nervously, she responded:

“Eiko arrived earlier than yesterday…”

“Everyone else has already been and gone.”

During the three days of the Sport of the Masks, the head server explained, all the servers who worked at the salon practically raced to see who could get to work first.

Servers who actively enjoyed the event did it so they could choose a costume they liked. Servers who didn’t, did it so they could choose costumes that were slightly less heinous.

Echo hadn’t known about this. The head server spoke simply:

“There’s only one costume left for you, Eiko-chan.”

“……Again?”

“Again.” The head server nodded.

This was exactly what had happened yesterday. Yesterday, as today, they’d told her to “choose a costume,” but all she’d been able to do was take the last remaining one. Thanks to that, she’d ended up having to

wear the humiliating maid and cat-ears headband costume.

"…I see," Echo murmured. Her expression was as gloomy as it could possibly get.

What sort of ridiculous getup would she be forced into today?

The head server brought out the costume she'd been holding behind her back and spoke cheerfully:

"Ta-daaa! This is your first costume for today, Eiko-chan!"

At the sight of the costume being flourished right in front of her, Echo's eyes widened slightly. At first glance, it was fairly sedate for a costume, a practically normal outfit.

If all the servers had competed to take the least embarrassing costumes for themselves, it seemed strange that this should have been the last one left. It was a full suit of clothes—a jacket and trousers—and its basic color was white.

Echo's seen this somewhere before, Echo thought.

"It's the Lutwidge Academy uniform. …

The boys' version."

As Echo murmured, the head server nodded. "That's right."

It was the uniform of the school attended by Elliot, the Nightray family's son, and Ada Vessalius, the woman Vincent was seeing.

The head server continued with a vaguely faraway look in her eyes:

"Lots of the servers who work here are in their late twenties or somewhere in their thirties, you know. I'm thirty-one myself."

"…Yes." Echo looked blank. She had no idea what this was about.

"Even if it is a famous school everyone wishes they'd gone to, it would've been too awkward for any of them to wear a school uniform. It would've looked…you know… sort of pathetic…"

The woman seemed to feel this deeply, but Echo only tilted her head, perplexed; she didn't really understand.

The head server was looking at Echo as if she was somehow dazzling, and her expression was a bit envious. True, never having attended school, Echo did feel some

slight resistance to donning a school uniform, but…compared with the barbarian fur and the poisonous horned frog suit, it was a hundred— No, a thousand times better.

Even when it was time to change costumes, if nobody wanted this one, she might get to wear it all day long.

Today might end up being a little easier than yesterday…

Once Echo had changed into the Lutwidge Academy boys' uniform, cherishing that hope, the head server spoke to her:

"Wow, you look good in boys' clothes, Eiko-chan."

"…No." Echo blushed very slightly.

"All right, then. First thing, could I have you take tea to the Lion Room on the second floor?"

"Excuse me?"

"They asked for you specifically. The guests who were here yesterday are here again, bright and early.

"They must've liked you," the head server said, smiling mischievously. Echo's hopes were shattered in an instant.

……

Things couldn't be worse.

As Echo left the dressing room, her face was haggard and gaunt.

She had to go to the kitchen first, in order to make the tea. Just as it had yesterday, the hall bustled with servers in haunted-house costumes, and the variety of disguises seemed to have increased since the day before.

In addition to the costumes she'd seen yesterday, there were pirates and forest huntsmen and fairies.

Echo was beginning to get a headache.

She started unsteadily down the hall, one hand pressed to her forehead. —And then, from behind her:

Ka-clang ka-clang, ka-clang.

Hearing a metallic racket, Echo turned, perplexed…and sucked in her breath.

"_____?!"

Ka-clang ka-clang ka-clang ka-clang ka-clang ka-clang.

A big suit of armor was clanking and

crashing its way down the hall.

From the top of its head to the tips of its toes, she couldn't see the smallest bit of bare skin. It was full-body armor, made of thick metal plates put together in a complicated way; both arms and legs, the neck, chest, torso, and hips were completely covered. The full-face helmet hid the head entirely, and although there were thin slits for the eyes, it seemed hard to see out of.

This couldn't possibly be a guest. It looked like a good, old-fashioned knight costume. The armored server seemed to be struggling with the weight of the armor and the bad visibility, and they wobbled this way and staggered that way as they made their way down the hall toward her.

Echo pressed close to the wall, waiting for the server to pass by. She watched the armor's back as they tottered away, looking ready to topple over at any moment.

Can they even serve customers like that…?

She really didn't think they could.

However, Echo wasn't in any condition to worry about other servers' service. She had to get the tea and hurry to the Lion Room,

where the customers were waiting for her. Whether she wanted to go or not.

When she thought about what yesterday had been like, her heart felt heavy.

* * *

"Yes, yes-yes, good! Wonderful!"

"I liked the feminine maid look, but this boy look is nice, too. Quite gallant."

"Hey, the best part is the sweetness *within* the gallantry."

"True. You'd never get such a perfect androgynous feel with an actual boy."

Today, once again, the aristocrats from the day before tumultuously traded opinions, this time on Echo's boys' school uniform.

A notice hung on the wall, apparently placed there at some point yesterday: PLEASE REFRAIN FROM MAKING UNREASONABLE DEMANDS OF THE SERVERS. There wasn't a hint of "status" about this place anymore. However, possibly thanks to that sign, Echo wasn't bothered with over-the-top requests the way she had been yesterday.

"W-well, then… If you'll excuse me."

Dizzied by the aristocrats' enthusiasm and

feeling suddenly fatigued, Echo left the Lion Room.

…This really is……awful…

She walked down the corridor, a little unsteadily. She'd be serving customers all day, and the day had only just begun. That alone was enough to make her light-headed, and if Basil again failed to appear today, she'd be here tomorrow as well. Just thinking about it doubled her fatigue.

Echo reached the head of the stairs and started down on feeble feet.

Echo will rest in the dressing room for a little while, she thought. If she didn't, she'd never last.

—Just then.

Ka-clang! Behind her, at the top of the stairs, there was a violent, metallic noise. It was followed by a muffled voice saying, "Wah-wah-waaaah!"

On reflex, Echo turned.

She saw the big suit of armor. It was teetering on the very top step. Apparently the server had tried to go down and had stepped wrong. They were struggling in what looked

like a strange dance, but in that heavy armor, there was no way they could regain their balance.

They were going to fall.

It would be absolutely impossible for the petite Echo to catch them.

"_____!"

Immediately, Echo tried to spring to the side to avoid them, but…

"Whoever's there, get out of the way!"

She froze. That voice, the one that had come from the armor's helmet.

She knew it, but it wasn't a voice she should ever have heard in this situation, in a place like this.

Her surprise had slowed her reaction, and she wasn't able to dodge the armor completely.

The armor came tumbling down from the upper floor, covering Echo, and they fell onto a landing between the first and second floors. For a moment, Echo's mind seemed to sail far away, but there wasn't much pain. She blinked several times, taking in the situation.

The armored server had just managed to plant their arms on the landing, to keep from crushing Echo.

Dazed, breathing raggedly, Echo gazed at the helmet right in front of her.

Those thin eye slits in the front of the helmet. Through them, she could see emerald eyes. From inside the helmet, a voice spoke, laced with surprise and worry:

“Huh? Eko-chan…?”

At the voice, Echo forgot to retort, “It’s Echo.” Instead, she spoke his name, too:

“—You’re…”

Why? How? She was enveloped in a storm of questions.

“If you have the same dream three times,” Echo’s master had said. …But she’d only had it twice so far.

And yet.

“Oz…sama?”

* * *

IN THE SERVERS’ DRESSING ROOM…

“Are you hurt anywhere, Eko-chan? Are you

okay?”

Oz had gotten out of the armor with Echo’s help, and as he asked the question, his face was flooded with guilt. Echo, who had regained her composure, looked around, making sure there was no one except Oz and herself in the room, then retorted, “It’s Echo.”

At that routine exchange, Oz finally smiled. The two of them sat down in some of the chairs lined up along the dressing room wall.

Neither of them spoke right away. However, it was obvious that they were both wondering the same thing about each other.

Boldly, Echo opened her mouth:

“Why are you here, Oz-sama?”

“Why are you here, Eko-chan?”

Their voices overlapped perfectly. Once again, they fell silent.

How should Echo explain this? Echo thought, and thought, and thought.

“Echo is, um…working part-time.”

Even she thought it sounded fishy. At

Echo's words, Oz seemed dubious. "Hmm?"

Echo knew he wouldn't buy it, Echo thought, but, unexpectedly, Oz spoke a little happily:

"Huh! That makes two of us, then."

This time, it was Echo's turn to say, "Huh?" In spite of herself, she stared back at Oz.

Part-time job. Work. Earning money.

As a son of one of the four great dukedoms, there was no way Oz needed to do any of those things. Everyone knew that. Oz must have sensed the obvious doubt in Echo's mind. He gave a faint, wry smile, scratching the tip of his nose with a finger.

"Right, a part-time job. I wanted to earn some money on my own."

Echo watched Oz, wordlessly. Oz looked up at the ceiling; he seemed a little embarrassed.

"Break referred me to this place. I don't know anything about this sort of thing, so…"

"Xerxes Break…" Echo murmured.

"—Yeah. There was no one else I could

talk to about it."

"What about Gilbert-sama?"

Echo gave the name of Oz's valet, but immediately thought she hadn't really needed to ask. Echo knew Gilbert, too. If Oz had said he wanted to earn money on his own, that master-focused, worrywart Gilbert would only have objected.

As Echo had guessed, Oz said, "Gil doesn't know."

"I see." Echo nodded.

She understood Oz's story. However, there was something that still didn't make sense to her. Oz had never been pressed for money in his life. What had made him want to earn it on his own?

Echo wanted to ask, but she hadn't told him her own real reasons, and she was hesitant about one-sidedly asking him questions.

When Echo fell silent, Oz let his gaze wander through space for a short while. Then, smiling, he looked at Echo.

"Things you buy with your own money mean more, I think. It's like…they're the real

thing."

—The real thing.

Echo didn't know what Oz's "real thing" meant. However, from the sound of his words, she realized it was something important. "…You're right," she answered, simply, and she didn't ask him anything else.

As Oz spoke, he folded his hands on top of his head.

"Still, that was a surprise. I never thought I'd meet you here, Eko-chan."

Then, suddenly, he put his face very near Echo's and beamed.

In spite of herself, Echo shrank back, freezing up. Oz continued, looking right at Echo:

"Aren't coincidences like this great?"

"……Echo doesn't really…"

As Echo answered, she averted her eyes slightly. She was blushing faintly.

"You know. The way it feels a little like fate."

At Oz's words, after a short pause, Echo spoke softly. "…No, it doesn't."

“You think?” Oz gave a light smile. For some reason, it made an emotion like irritation, or maybe chagrin, well up inside Echo, and she looked at him steadily, glaring. Oz said, “What’s the matter, Eko-chan?” His voice was easygoing, and his expression was curious.

Just as Echo put more force into her glare, there was a *click*, and the door of the dressing room opened.

“Oh, Oz-kun and Eiko-chan. Slacking? That’s no good.”

A voice that held the hint of a smile spoke, and the head server entered the dressing room. The woman was holding a big cardboard carton in her arms. Oz and Echo sprang to their feet, ducking their heads in apology. “We’re sorry.” Gesturing with her hand, the head server told them it was fine to sit down.

“If you don’t rest a bit while you work, you’ll never last. —I mean, really, you’re both new hires, and you got hit with this event right off the bat.”

“Eiko couldn’t agree more.”

Echo nodded decisively. However, in

contrast, with a smile that practically shone, Oz shook his head.

“No, it’s not like that at all. I’m seriously moved!”

““Moved?”” Echo and the head server simultaneously cocked their heads.

Oz spoke with an expression that was innocence itself:

“I never thought working would be so much fun. ‘A job,’ huh… Everyone’s so lucky! They get to go to ‘jobs’ every day, don’t they!”

His excited tone would have made more sense if he’d said “party” instead of “job.” There wasn’t a shred of deceit mixed in with his words.

However, precisely because that was true, Echo fell silent. With a complicated expression on her face, she shot a glance at the head server. Giving a slightly forced smile, the head server murmured, “You’re very well-bred, aren’t you.” Echo wondered if she should attempt to smooth things over for Oz somehow.

Oz kept talking, still wearing that

sparkling smile:

“And besides, all the servers who work here are beautiful ladies.”

Instantly, as if the remark had gone straight to her heart, the head server blushed. In a regretful voice, she said:

“If you’d like, Oz-kun, you can work here forever, but—”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I, um…”

“I know. The owner told me.”

Oz looked apologetic, and the head server giggled.

In a whisper, Oz told Echo, “Apparently Break is friends with the salon’s owner.” Friends with Break: That alone was enough to explain to Echo why this weird event dubbed “the Sport of the Masks” was held at a salon that had traditions and status.

It meant that like attracted like, and eccentrics attracted eccentrics.

“All right,” the head server said, as if to change the mood. She held out the cardboard carton.

“It’s about time for a costume change, you

know. Here you go. This one's brand-new; it just arrived."

The head server explained that it was a full-body, cartoon-character costume. This reminded Echo of the poisonous horned frog costume, and her mood turned gloomy.

However, Oz's eyes sparkled, and he ran up to the head server.

Taking the cardboard carton, he pulled out the folded costume and gave a little cheer.

"Whoa! Eko-chan, look, look!"

Oz turned to Echo, holding up the costume's head and letting the folded body unfurl.

At his excited voice, Echo looked at it as if she was looking at something dangerous. She averted her face slightly, peeking at it out of the corner of narrowed eyes.

And then.

_____*?!*

In an instant, her eyes widened almost aggressively, and she stared at the costume as if drawn to it, clinging to it.

Her lips trembled slightly, and she spoke. Her voice wasn't all that loud, but it was filled with excitement.

"That's…Jyanta-san…"

What had appeared was the mascot character that was currently all the rage in Reveil, popular with men and women, young and old—a Jyanta-kun costume.

Involuntarily, Echo stood up from her chair with a clatter. Oz was holding the costume up in front of him, and it blocked his view, so he couldn't see Echo. However, he must have sensed that something in the atmosphere was different. "Eko-chan…?" he called.

Standing beside Oz, the head server noticed the change in Echo and smiled mischievously.

"Want to wear it, Eiko-chan?"

Echo wasn't able to answer that question right away.

· 10:15 PM

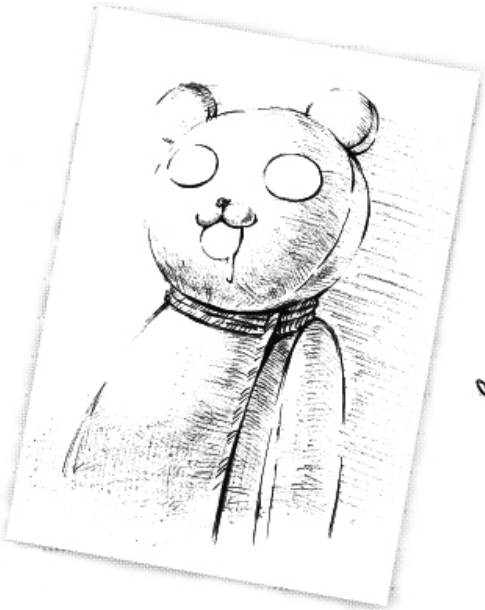
The second day of the undercover investigation is over.

The target failed to appear today as well.

Instead (?), encountered an unexpected person. That person explained why he was at the infiltration site, but much of his explanation was unclear. However, didn't think it would be all right to pry, so did not inquire closely.

Today, was busy covering for him. It was touch-and-go at first, but near the end of the work day, no longer needed to cover for him. Apparently the agreement was that he was only working at the salon "for today," and when it was time to leave work, he seemed to regret it: "Just when I'd finally learned the job…"

……also a bit sorry.



3

There was a bright moon that night.

Echo was Vincent's valet, and her room in the Nightray manor was in a place that really had to be called a "garret." There was a plain, lonely-looking bed, and a handheld lantern on the floor. The light from the lantern dimly illuminated the room.

It was a dreary space with barely any furniture, but Echo had never minded.

Echo was lying on her bed, on her stomach, with her diary open on top of the cushion she used as a pillow. One of Echo's hands held a pencil.

"Echo is also a bit sorry…"

Echo murmured the last line of the entry she'd written on a new page, as if tracing it.

"……"

Her eyes, which had been focused on the diary, slid slightly to the side. They came to rest on a single photograph that had been placed right next to the diary. The photo was

turned facedown, and it wasn't possible to see what was in it.

As she looked at the back of the photograph, Echo's expression was as emotionless and inorganic as always.

"—Haaah."

With a little sigh, Echo closed the diary firmly. She laid the photograph on top of it, set both beside her bed, then rolled over, lying on her back with her head on the cushion. She folded her hands on her stomach. Her eyes, which were looking straight up, were fixed on the skylight in the ceiling.

She could see the moon, shining brightly.

"…Today was rough all day again."

Muttering to herself dispassionately, she thought back over the day. Inwardly, Echo murmured softly:

Maybe Echo did want to wear the Jyanta-san costume, too.

The words that had been spoken to her in the dressing room rose in her mind: *"Want to wear it, Eiko-chan?"*

* * *

“Want to wear it, Eiko-chan?”

When the head server spoke to her, mischievously, Echo froze up. Silent, speechless, her expression was as composed as a doll’s, but her internal conflict seemed to steal into it. For a little while, silence reigned in the dressing room, and Oz called her name, puzzled: “Eko-chan?”

“……No, thank you. I won’t wear it,” Echo answered.

When the head server smiled a bit regretfully, Oz happily declared, “All right, *I’ll* wear it!” He began energetically pulling on the Jyanta-kun costume.

Echo watched him, steadily. Her inorganic expression didn’t betray the slightest emotion; only her eyes held a tiny, sparkling glow.

Finally, having gotten into the costume, Oz spread his arms wide and spun around once in front of Echo.

There it was: an unmistakable, life-sized, walking Jyanta-kun.

“……ooh…”

Faintly, ever so faintly, a cry of admiration

escaped Echo.

“Whaddaya think, Eko-chan?! Does it look good on me?”

Full-body costumes didn’t “look good” on anyone, but Oz asked the question in high spirits. The head server was applauding: “Yes, yes it does.” Echo’s eyebrows twitched, and she balled both her hands into tight fists. She hadn’t replied, and Oz tilted his head in confusion: “???”

Echo’s eyes were downcast, and a low voice issued from her lips:

“…….lite.”

““Huh?””

Unable to catch what Echo had said, Oz and the head server spoke at the same time. Echo’s head came up sharply; she pointed straight at Oz and spoke:

“No ‘whaddaya.’ Jyanta-san’s speech is much more polite. Get it right, please.”

She sounded detached, but there was an overwhelming force in her words.

Overawed, Oz said, “H-he does,” just to show he’d been listening. There was a short, bewildered silence, but then he cleared his

throat, just once. Raising his round, fingerless, stuffed animal–like hand up high:

“Why, hello there! I’m Jyanta-kun, and I’ve come to see Eko-chan!”

Then, briskly, he held out a hand to Echo.

…But Echo didn’t react.

Then, a single word slipped from her mouth. It was soft, yet somehow fervent.

“—Jyanta-san.”

As if the murmur had told him he passed, Oz struck a mighty muscle pose. The head server, who’d been watching them cheerfully, spoke as if to set things back on track:

“Okay, let’s have you get out there and work like mad. Oh, you can stay in that uniform, Eiko-chan. That costume’s really tough on adults, you know…”

This was certainly good news, but Echo just stood there, dazed.

Looking at her, the head server laughed and added:

“I imagine it’s going to be hard for Oz-kun to serve customers in a full-body costume

like that, so could you go along and cover fo__”

“Understood-I’ll-cover-for-him.”

Before the head server could finish saying “cover for him?” Echo answered her all in one breath.

She was really raring to go. Echo took the stuffed animal hand that had been held out to her:

“Come on, Jyanta-san. Let’s go.”

Tugging the costume’s hand, she began to walk smartly out of the dressing room. Her enthusiasm was so great that Oz and the head server were taken aback. Reaching the door, Echo put her hand on the knob. Then the head server spoke to her, merrily:

“Eiko-chan, you like Jyanta-kun, don’t you.”

Echo stopped dead, one hand on the doorknob.

Standing just like that, with her face to the door, without turning around, Echo said:

“……Not particularly.”

Her ears had gone bright red.

Then Echo opened the door and left the dressing room at a brisk pace. From behind her, the head server called, “Ah—Oz-kun, watch your head,” and then there was a dull *whunk*. When Echo turned, the Jyanta-kun

costume's head seemed to have struck the door, and it was just about to fall off.

Hastily, Oz caught it with one hand.

"If it falls, it'll get dirty."

"Whew," Oz exhaled, and then smiled at her.

"Oh, yes—"

Responding a little apologetically, Echo looked down, abruptly seeming to realize something.

Her hand had caught Jyanta-kun's hand and was pulling it. Through the cloth of the costume, she could feel Oz's hand.

Suddenly, her heart beat faster.

Even she didn't know why. It wasn't the first time she'd pulled Oz along by the hand like this. She'd done the same thing at the Saint Bridget's Day festival. When they'd chased the fireworks that shot into the sky.

And yet why was it that right now, just pulling Oz's hand—and with the cloth of a full-body costume between their hands, at that—made her heart pound? When she stayed still, looking down at their linked hands, Oz called to her, as though to check

on her: “Eko-chan?”

With a start, Echo shook her head.

“It’s nothing. …Let’s go. We have work to do.”

Speaking as if to remind herself, Echo tugged on Oz’s hand. They went out into the corridor and began walking.

They were still holding hands.

It was only the second time…

She’d heard that if you had the same dream three times, it would come true. However, so far, she’d only had it twice.

Even so, it had come true.

Oz had appeared, right before her eyes. In a place, and in a situation, where she’d never have expected to meet him.

That’s why, Echo thought. Because she hadn’t been the least bit mentally prepared. Because it had caught her off guard.

That must be it. That’s why. I’m still a little startled. That’s all.

She tried to convince herself that it could be nothing else.

—The fact that her heart was still beating fast.

“You want to take a photograph?”

A guest room known as the Purple Room, on the second floor of Silver Moon Garden. Oz, still in his costume and standing in front of some guests, an elderly couple, cocked his head in bewilderment at the sudden request. Echo, who was waiting beside Oz, shot a glance at the wall.

There was the sign with the message, PLEASE REFRAIN FROM MAKING UNREASONABLE DEMANDS OF THE SERVERS.

Registering Echo’s gaze, the elderly husband nodded.

“We do understand what’s written on the sign. If you can’t do it, please tell us so. Only, you see, our grandchildren love Jyanta-kun. They’d be thrilled if we showed them a photograph of that costume.”

“I see,” Echo responded, and looked down. The elderly couple said that, just before they came to the salon, they’d been to pick up a camera that had been out for repairs. They had it in their leather satchel now.

From inside the costume's mask, Oz looked at Echo.

"If it's okay, I'd like to help them out…"

Echo thought hard for a little while, then answered, "Echo also thinks it's all right." Simply taking a photograph shouldn't count as an unreasonable demand. Thanking them again and again, the elderly couple eagerly took the camera out of their large leather satchel and began to get ready.

In the arrangement they chose, the elderly couple was seated companionably at the table while Jyanta-kun stood behind them with his hands on their shoulders.

They left the task of working the camera to Echo. Echo had never used a camera before and wasn't at all confident, but the elderly husband showed her what to do, and she managed, with difficulty. She had no idea whether she'd gotten a good picture. When she'd finished, the elderly couple thanked her again.

…And then they said this:

"Thank you so much for your help. As a token of our gratitude, let us photograph the two of you as well. Go on, line up."

“Wow, lucky us, Eko-chan! We get a souvenir photo.”

Oz sent up a genuinely happy cheer, but Echo was bewildered. She fidgeted and hesitated.

She wanted to have it taken. She did want to, but the idea of being photographed standing next to Jyanta-kun, having fun, was terribly embarrassing. Besides, although her fundamental objective was the search for “Basil,” she was technically working as a server at the moment.

Oz gave her back a supportive little push; his voice was cheerful:

“Come on, Eko-chan, it’s okay. It’s not every day that someone volunteers to take your photo for you.”

“It’s Echo, not Eko.”

Echo corrected him, as if she’d just remembered.

“And in any case, we’re at work. Having souvenir photographs taken is not part of a server’s job.”

She spoke flatly, and Oz’s shoulders drooped dejectedly.

When he did that while dressed as Jyanta-kun, the gesture became vaguely funny and charming, and Echo felt a bit tickled. Of course, she didn't let it show in her expression, not at all. As Echo and Oz squabbled, the elderly husband ducked his head apologetically.

"I'm sorry. We didn't mean to make you quarrel. I suppose I shouldn't have said that."

"Yes, really." The wife also bowed her head, quietly.

"Oh, no—"

Unsettled by the apology she'd provoked, Echo shook her head. The elderly husband patted the camera and murmured, sounding very regretful. He cleared his throat.

"I didn't think a chance like this would ever come again, you see."

—Never again?!?!

The words rang in Echo's mind like the sound of a bell.

Never again.

Never again.

Never again.

She would never get another opportunity to be photographed with Jyanta-kun.

…Besides, the person inside Jyanta-san is… No, this has nothing to do with who's inside!

In any case.

When she thought of the days she spent working under Vincent, it really didn't seem likely that she'd get another chance like this one.

Shoulders drooping, the elderly husband slowly began to return the camera to the leather satchel.

On reflex, Echo spoke:

"I-if that's what you'd like, sir…then… there's no help for it…"

"Oho," he murmured, and the elderly couple both looked at Oz, flashing him impish, assertive thumbs-up. Their triumphant faces seemed to say, *Now* that's *the wisdom of age.* From inside the mask, Oz gave a delighted whoop. "Yesss!"

And then…

* * *

In the garret of the Nightray manor. Echo,

who'd been looking up at the skylight, rolled over.

"……"

She was looking at the diary she'd set beside her bed, and at the single photograph turned facedown on top of it.

Echo stretched out a hand and picked up the photograph.

She turned it over, holding it up to the moonlight that streamed in through the skylight.

It was a picture of herself, standing next to the Jyanta-kun costume. The elderly couple had left Silver Moon Garden, but had come back when Echo and Oz got off work, just to bring the photos to them. *"We got them developed quickly."* They'd laughed.

They'd given Oz and Echo one each.

"…Oz-sama has the same photograph as Echo…" she murmured, half-unconsciously, but in the next instant, she shook her head vigorously.

And what if he does? It doesn't mean anything. It isn't important.

She desperately canceled out the words

she'd murmured.

"_____"

Echo reached out for her diary and picked it up. She sat up and opened it on her lap. For a little while, she gazed at the photograph. Then, gently, she put it on that day's page and closed the book. Even if somebody saw the picture, they wouldn't know who was inside the Jyanta-kun costume.

Setting the diary on the floor, she picked up the lantern, took off its cover, and blew into it, extinguishing the light.

Only moonlight filled the garret room.

Echo lay down on the bed. Soon sleepiness crept up on her, and she gave a small yawn.

Her lips moved, addressing no one in particular: *Good night.*

That night, Echo didn't dream.

4

“Well, in three days, the matter should be settled.”

As Vincent had predicted, on the afternoon of the third day, Basil put in an appearance at Silver Moon Garden.

Echo carried out her original duties perfectly, and informed Vincent.

A FEW DAYS LATER.

Someone raided Basil’s hideout in a corner of Old Town. Basil and every last one of the members of the criminal organization with which he’d been meeting were killed. Basil did make a temporary escape in his carriage, but his body was found the next day.

· 10:30 AM

The sound of scissors cutting things apart is coming from Vincent-sama's room.

· 11:07

On Vincent-sama's orders,

went to Pandora to check on Gilbert-sama.

· 12:40

At Pandora, observed Sharon Rainsworth-sama.

She was grumbling that she hadn't seen Xerxes Break since morning.

· 1:33 PM

Met Gilbert-sama in an office.

Entered the room and saw Gilbert-sama gazing at a black leather glove he was wearing (just one). He looked happy.

Continued to watch. Gilbert-sama hastily removed the glove and asked me not to tell Oz-sama about it. He seemed desperate.

A single glove, and Oz-sama. What is the connection?

……Unclear.

In his room at the Nightray manor, Vincent lay on the sofa, drowsily talking to Echo:

“Basil’s carriage ran recklessly down Hodgepodge Street. I hear it caused a bit of a stir…

“Quite the nuisance.” Vincent smiled thinly.

Echo nodded in agreement. Her face held no emotion whatsoever. It seemed almost artificial.

Vincent narrowed his eyes at her in a smile, as if admiring a favorite doll, and spoke:

“All right then, Echo. Here are your next orders…”

The world still holds lots and lots of things that Echo doesn’t know or understand, Echo thought.

“—That is why Echo keeps a diary.”

Murmuring, she closed the diary on the entry she’d just finished writing and tucked it

away inside her jacket. Her expression seemed very faintly satisfied.

~ Fin ~

In Closing

Thinking about sin is like thinking about life, or about the world.

In terms of wickedness, acts of creation are precisely equal with crimes worthy of the death penalty. Not only are all artists murderers, but they target indiscriminately, wallowing in pleasure and joy over killing the souls of anybody and everybody. It's true. Within every work of art, from the very beginning, there is sin.

Art is the act of expressing the world we see with our own eyes in such a way that it becomes clear to the eyes of others. If an artist presents a single pebble as his work, it means that, to him, the world is a pebble. Should he present countless corpses, then the world is a pile of corpses.

The man with the black leather gloves murdered again and again for no reason, and before the heap of corpses, he still felt an unslakable thirst. All that was there was a

vast, vague landscape of the imagination. Therefore, he was not an artist.

I enjoy having my works misunderstood. At the same time, I also take the position that there are no misunderstandings in this world. Misunderstanding is understanding. Let all my readers dramatically misunderstand this book as well. I welcome all accomplices. Therein lies a new world, a world transformed.

To my mind, the world must not simply exist, but must change constantly. The reversal of reality and appearance, in other words. If the world is not equal to this task, then that world is truly idle. Above all else, such a world is boring.

Sin, life, and the world form circles. Art, or creation, is nothing less than working to appropriate these circles for ourselves. No doubt I'll kill the world someday, through sheer curiosity.

I contemplate original sin. What was the first crime committed in this world? Who passed judgment on that crime? Or rather, to begin with, were they able to pass judgment on it at all?

To debate, we must have definitions. As I mentioned earlier, the world is a work of art, and in that case, we may consider the first crime to have been the creation of the world. Thus, we who dwell in this world are with sin from the instant of our birth. If everyone bears the blame for a crime, there is no meaning to criminal acts. In other words, there is no meaning to art. This is precisely why people love it.

Creation, needless to say, is the act of destroying something. As we create, we destroy. In that case, destruction is creation. Therefore, I create, and I grow intoxicated on works created by others. I love art. Love, along with a kind of dread.

The murderer murders people, and the detective pursues him. There is a circle there as well. To join its ends, I used black leather gloves. Black is the color of night. Leather gloves signify that he is unable to touch the world with his bare hands. However, even cloaked in night, the world is far too hideous to touch with one's hands. —Who was it that said its atrocity and cruelty are beautiful?

Those words may be true art.

Thinking about sin is like thinking about

life. Or about the world. Or art. And, I trust, beyond that darkness sleeps new potential for mankind.

—*On a Night When the Crow Jeers*, by Evil B.

The knock at the door of his study came just as he finished writing the afterword.

It was late at night, and the whole Baskerville mansion was hushed and sleeping. The study was lit by the soft glow of candlelight.

“I’ve brought your tea, Master.”

The voice of his valet, Oswald, came to him through the door. Levi returned the quill pen he was holding to its stand, ordering him to come in.

The door opened quietly, and Oswald entered, balancing a tray on one hand. His expression held its usual reticence, but there was a hint of displeasure there as well. When he’d come up beside Levi, he set a steaming teacup down on the edge of the desk, which already held parchment and an ink bottle.

Oswald glanced at the parchment on which Levi had just finished writing, but soon averted his eyes, seeming disinterested. He looked at his master steadily.

“Although it is late at night, some servants are still awake. If you would like tea made,

you could order them to make it."

His tone held an unspoken reproach: *Why me?* Everyone in the Baskerville mansion knew Oswald wasn't good at making tea.

"I wanted to drink your lousy tea to commemorate the occasion. I've just finished writing."

As he spoke, Levi picked up the teacup and took a sip. He drank as if it tasted wonderful.

"Yeah, that's awful. That's it; that's what I wanted."

"……"

Morosely, Oswald was silent. Completely ignoring his valet, Levi merrily savored his tea, saying, "Nasty, nasty" over and over. When he'd drunk about half of it, he returned it to the desk. "Nn," he sighed, raising both arms in a stretch.

Returning to his original position, he murmured, "Oh, that's right." From the chair where he sat, Levi looked up at his valet, who stood beside him. Oswald merely looked back at him.

"I was writing the afterword for a novel,

and I was really on a roll this time. Read it through for me?"

Levi took the parchment from the desk—the ink wasn't entirely dry yet—and held it out to Oswald.

As he took it, Oswald frowned slightly.

However, he didn't refuse. He dropped his eyes to the document and silently began to read. It wasn't very long; in a few minutes, he'd finished. When his valet raised his head from the parchment, Levi asked, "How is it?" He was intensely interested.

Oswald answered without the least hesitation:

"I don't know."

His tone was adamantine, something that would never shatter. With his mouth half-open, Levi murmured:

"I see…"

"Yes. I don't know."

"I see……"

Somewhere in the darkness of night, a crow cawed.

I STUMBLED ONTO THAT AT A USED BOOKSTORE, AND THE OWNER DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT HIM EITHER.
YEAH...
GOT CLOCKED BY LEO AS PUNISHMENT
...STILL, I WONDER WHAT SORT OF GUY EVIL B. WAS.
REALLY? I PICTURED HIM AS A SICKLY, UNLUCKY YOUNG MAN!
HE WAS NORMALLY REALLY QUIET, BUT INSIDE, HE HID PASSION STRONGER THAN ANYONE ELSE'S AND ANGER AT THE WORLD'S UNFAIRNESS!
DON'T YOU THINK HE ALWAYS FELT CLOSE TO DEATH, AND THAT'S WHY HE WAS ABLE TO WRITE SUCH HAUNTING, HEART-WRENCHING ENDINGS!?
USING "EVIL" AS HIS PEN NAME MAKES HIM SEEM OPENLY BAD AND REPROBATE...
...BUT ACTUALLY, HIS BOOKS ARE SOLID ENTERTAINMENT, AND THE AUTHOR'S MESSAGE STILL COMES THROUGH LOUD AND CLEAR.
WHAT HE WROTE IN THE AFTERWORD REALLY OPENED MY EYES!
FROM THE STIFFNESS OF SOME OF THE TEXT AND THOSE FIERCE EXPRESSIONS, I BET HE WAS LIKE A KNIGHT—BIG ON RULES AND ALWAYS THROWING HIMSELF INTO BATTLES!

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HA
HA
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BWAH
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HA
HA
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HA
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LEOOOOO! HOW COULD YOU SAY THAT!!?
HONESTLY. ALL I SAW WAS A FRIVOLOUS SKIRT-CHASER AND NUTJOB EXTRAORDINAIRE WHO THOUGHT "AS LONG AS LIFE IS FUN. ANYTHING'S FINE!☆" (HA-HA!)
SURE, HE TRIED TO GET ALL LOFTY AT THE END OF THE BOOK, BUT... (HA-HA!) FRANKLY, IT JUST FELT LIKE HE WAS FULL OF HIMSELF, AND I BET THE TEXT IS UNEVEN BECAUSE HE WASN'T A VERY GOOD WRITER! (HEH.)
NOOOO, NO, NO. (HEH-HEH!)

BWAA CHOO OEY!!
...ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, MASTER?
ZUBI (SNURF)
OH. YEAH.
SOMETHING JUST CAME OVER THE ABYSS.
??

Afterword

It's the third novel, and I'm officially greeting you in an afterword for the very first time. This is Shinobu Wakamiya. It's a pleasure to meet you.

I've always loved children's stories, and I love *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. When I heard that *PandoraHearts* had a world that was linked to children's stories and to *Alice*, I tracked down the series and became—and stayed—a reader who was at the mercy of a story just as tricky as Lewis Carroll's Alice series. …And now, as fate would have it, I've been allowed to write the novels.

When I was simply reading as a reader, it was fine for me to just enjoy the unpredictable story and what the characters said and did, and to let everything surprise me. However, when it came to moving the characters on my own and describing them through text, I had to do better.

My head isn't wired for thinking about

difficult things, but I put it into full operation, and I read the story—with its double and triple foreshadowing—over, and over, and over.

When I imagined I understood the characters and got carried away and tried to predict where the story would go, I fell hard for false leads and ended up being surprised anyway. That was what it was like to become deeply acquainted with *PandoraHearts*. I have no idea how often I got worn out and exhausted from being surprised!

PandoraHearts is full of appealing characters, but my first favorites were Alice and Gilbert, the ones who are straightforward and easy to understand. Characters like Oz and Break have something complicated deep inside them, but as the story advanced in the original manga, and as I wrote about them over and over in the novels, I gradually deciphered their feelings…and then, all at once, I felt close to them.

Then I discovered that Alice and Gilbert, the characters I'd thought were straightforward and simple, were actually much more than just straightforward and

simple, and I trembled with fear.

In other words, even now that I'm writing the novels, my relationship with *PandoraHearts* hasn't changed from what it was when I was just a reader. In that case, I plan to let this cruel and beautiful story toy with me and to enjoy it until the very end.

If I've managed to add even a little extra color to the pleasure of following the original through these three short-story collections, which focused on the characters' everyday lives, I'll be happy.

In closing, a few words of thanks.

First and foremost, to the creator of the original, Mochizuki-san. Every month, in the midst of the turmoil of her limit-pulverizing work on the series, Mochizuki-san helped me by meticulously checking the manuscripts and providing material. Without her help, I really don't think these three collections would have been completed. The illustrations and bonus manga are masterpieces, every time! They are!

These three books also exist through the help of the original manga's supervising editor, Mukasa-san, and the many other

people who are involved with *PandoraHearts*. I'm very grateful to all of you.

…And, above all, my greatest thanks go to you, the readers who've picked up this book.

I hope we'll be able to meet again in a fourth collection of short stories.

Shinobu Wakamiya

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COMIC ILLUSTRATION Jun Mochizuki
EDITOR Hitoshi Haruyama
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PandoraHearts ~Caucus Race~, Volume 3

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Novel PandoraHearts ~Caucus race~ vol. 3

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